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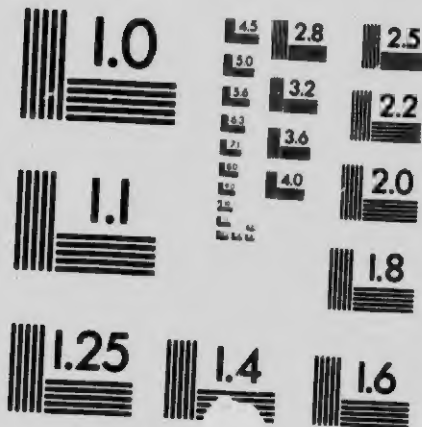


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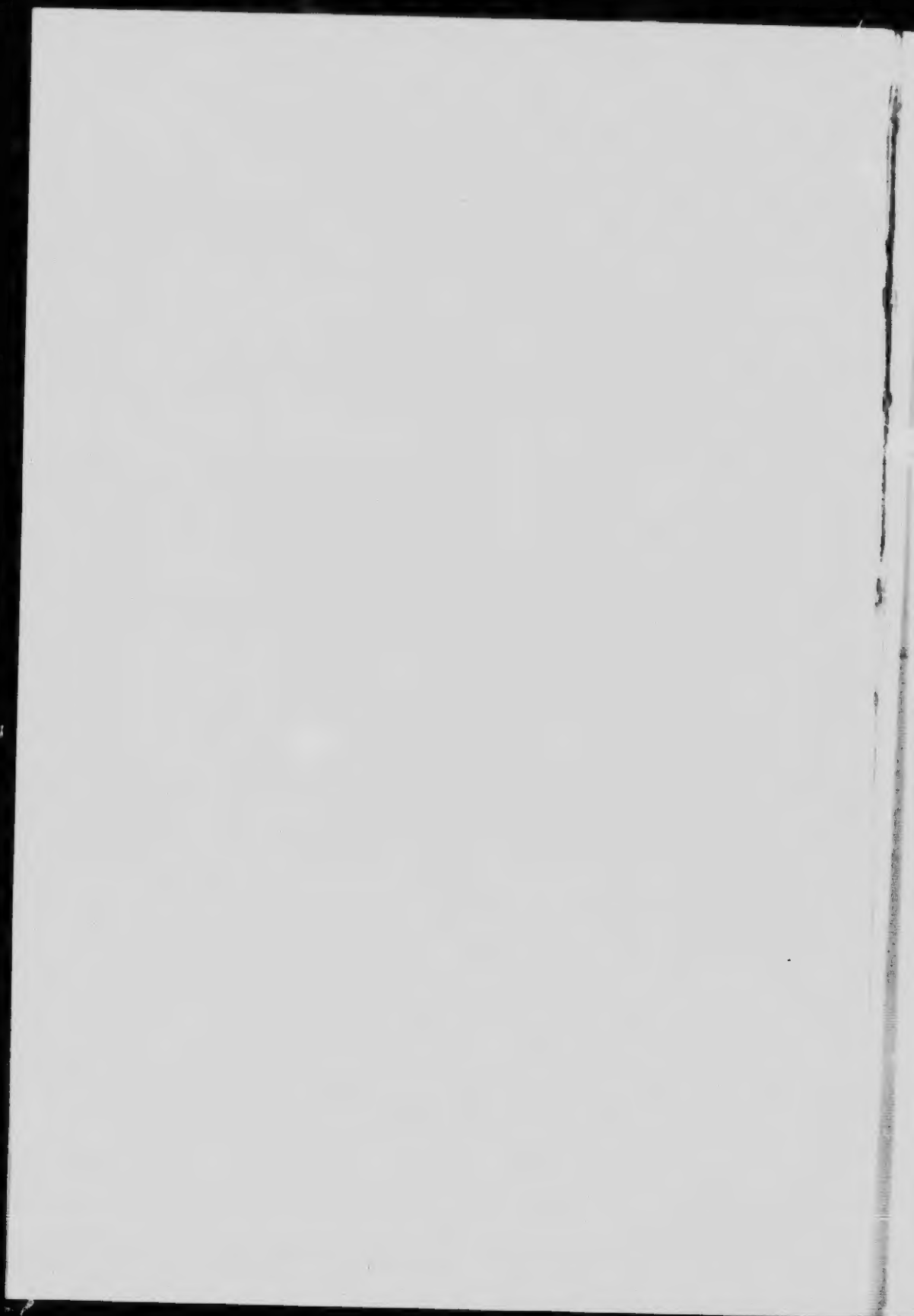
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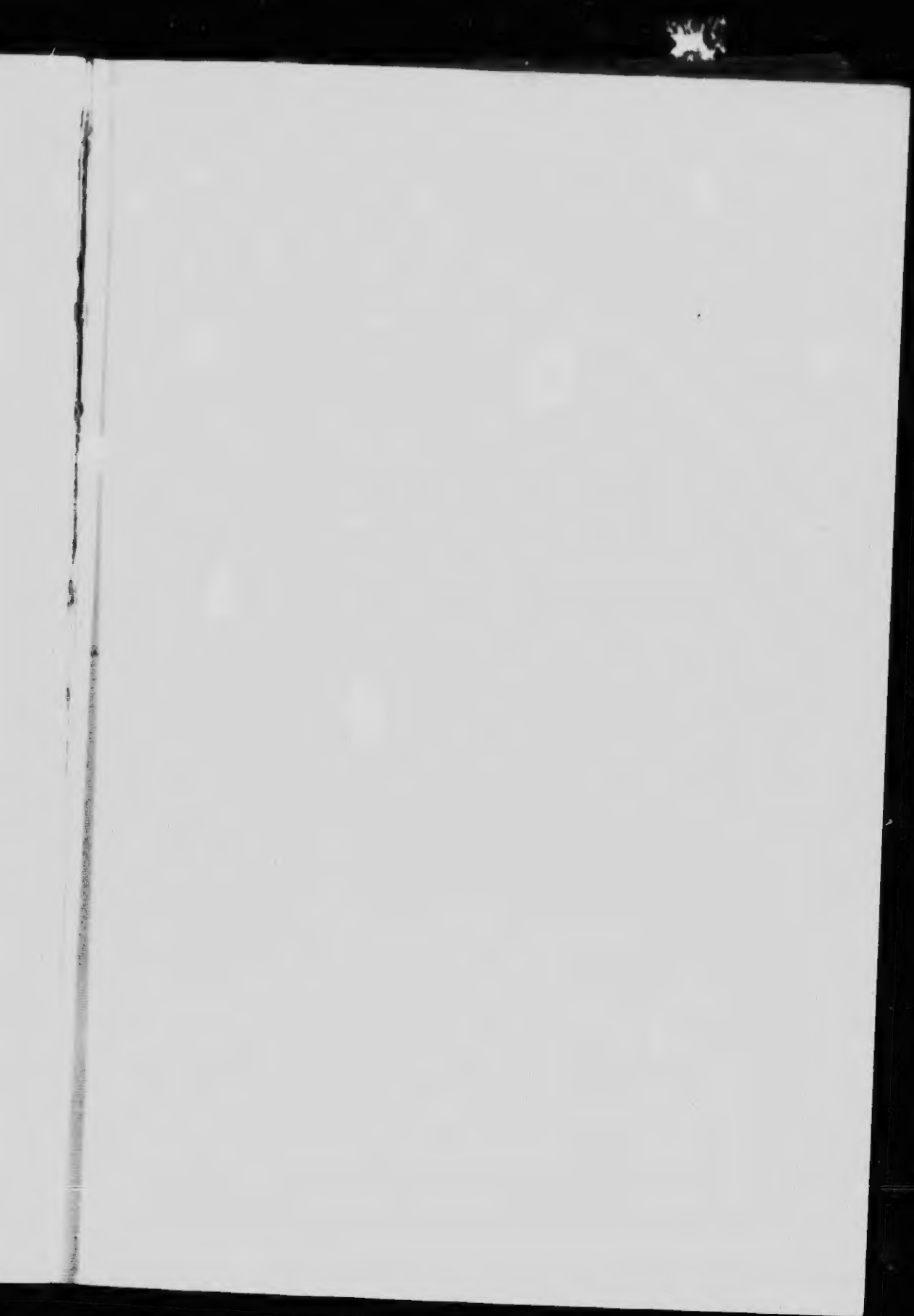
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MR. AND MRS. PIERCE







"Isn't she nice!" the girl whispered enthusiastically to Julian.
"Who is she?" "Oh, anybody—anybody at all," replied
he, turning upon her a constrained, enigmatic smile

MR. AND MRS. PIERCE

A STORY OF YOUTH

BY

CAMERON MACKENZIE

With Illustrations by Alonso Kimball



Toronto

*McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart
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MR. AND MRS. PIERCE



CHAPTER I

CHARLES WINTER HAS A CALLER

It was unusually late that morning when Charles Winter reached his office. He never came down town until the first of the subway rush was over but upon this occasion, toward the end of August, it was well past eleven before he threw his customary nod to the telephone-girl in the outer office and passed into his private room. He was conscious, as he did so, that the nod was curt—just as he had been aware of the tremor in his hand when he had bought his subway ticket and of the asperity of his look when the elevator-boy had turned to him with a friendly grin.

He went straight to his desk, which was flat and extraordinarily long and broad and rested in the exact middle of the large office carpet. Light from six windows came across the thick glass top which, mounted on a strip of green cloth, formed the surface.

Beside the huge desk and with the spacious bare walls surrounding him, Winter looked small and insignificant. Only his head seemed really large and important. His black, wire-like hair was close-cropped, and from the corners of his nose shadows of strained lines came down across his cheeks. There was no definite colour to his

eyes; the pupils seemed washed-out and faded, and the whites were brown and blurred.

As he turned to his mail there was a heavy frown on his face, and it was obvious that he was not in a propitious mood. Work was almost the sole dissipation of Charles Winter, and he had been making a night of it. Early the previous afternoon he had despatched an office-boy with a bundle of papers to his house uptown. He himself had followed soon afterward. First he had cut off the telephone, switching the connection to the basement where one of his two Japanese servants would remain. Next, he had gotten into a pair of loose, filmy pajamas and slipped on a light dressing-gown. Then he had gone to his library, its three high walls tiered to the ceiling with volumes, and locked the door. At seven-thirty his valet and butler had knocked and wheeled in a tray of two boiled eggs, toast and tea. Again at one o'clock there had been a knock, and this time his chef brought in a platter of cold chicken and a bottle of milk. The first light of an early dawn had checked him, and he had trudged to bed, leaving, scattered in the pale shadows of the room, stacks of leather-bound reports and upon the writing-board by the easy chair, where he had curled himself, page upon page of manuscript, in his neat, fine hand, clean and unspotted, with not a word or syllable changed. The brief, his night's work, was folded in his pocket now, ready to be typed.

These debauches were not frequent. Twenty years earlier they had been almost a part of Winter's routine.

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But more and more he had found himself after them with burning eyelids, unsteady knees, and a distressingly uneven temper. Latterly he had been particularly careful not to practise that form of indulgence when he had interviews ahead of him for the next day. Therefore, when he came to his office at all on the morning following such a siege, it was only to guard against the accumulation of unanswered mail. Certainly, such was his condition now that he had no intention of seeing any one, and when he found the girl from the telephone room, only a minute behind his heels, as he entered his private room, he was quite prepared to turn away any caller.

"A lady to see you, and she's been here an hour," the girl explained apologetically.

"I can't help it," snapped Winter, glancing at his appointment-pad to be sure he had not make a mistake.

"She's very nervous," pursued the girl timidly. "She asks every five minutes if you've come in."

Winter was annoyed and determined not to give in, especially as it was a woman who wished to intrude. He had a pronounced aversion to all women in business relations. They expected the impossible; they quarreled with the best results; explanations were wasted upon them. The lawyer was only casting around for a means of dismissing the caller decently when he asked:

"Did you get her name?"

"Mrs. Pierce."

Transformation came over his gray features. His frown disappeared. The heavy-drawn lines about his

mouth creased up; wrinkles of amusement appeared at the corners of his eyes. For a jaded morning Winter could think of no tonic so refreshing and stimulating as Janet Pierce.

"Show her in," he said, with a nod of his great head.

Within an incredibly short time Winter had a sort of consciousness that the girl was standing in the open doorway of his office. Her palpitating eagerness seemed to reach him in waves, and he was in the act of raising his head when she spoke. It was with half a laugh of amusement at her own impatience.

"I simply can't wait, Uncle Charles," she cried. "May I come in?"

And he found himself looking at her; the trim figure of a girl in a refreshing linen suit, and wearing a cockade hat. Her cheeks were glowing with soft colour; her moist lips were trembling slightly with suppressed excitement. This was Janet Pierce, and as with the flashings of silver shoe buckles, she crossed the dingy room, a hundred memories of her sprang to mind; the unseemly squawk she had let forth at her baptism, when the cold water touched her forehead; the pathetic greyness of her temples when she had been fighting the fact of her father's death; the sidelong smile of triumph she had flung him from the aisle on her wedding day; the picture of pride and adoration she had made when she held up her child, aged two weeks, for his approval. He had an affection for her out of all proportion to a guardian's task.

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"Of course you can't wait," he agreed indulgently, and was on his feet. "There would be something amiss if you could."

She gave him a small hand in a warm, firm grasp and hurried on, with gay intensity. "I do hope you have a little time—just a little—because I've a plan—the most wonderful plan—so exactly and absolutely the thing. And you must help me, Uncle Charles," she pursued, a confiding spontaneity in her smile. "I know you will, but I do so want you to do it—oh, not half-heartedly with a lot of tiresome objections. I want you to do it whole-heartedly, with ever so much enthusiasm, you know." She had perched herself on the very edge of the chair and was looking up at him with trustful eyes. "You will, won't you, Uncle Charles?" she asked.

"I will, my dear, if I possibly can."

"But you will! Promise you will!" she pleaded.

"That depends," he said firmly.

"Depends on what?" she demanded.

"On the plan." And sitting down, he regarded her. It was not the answer she wanted; but he had not dared to give her any other, and she was studying him with a small frown.

"If you were only one of those people," she finally observed, "who had a little faith—a little real confidence in others—the promise wouldn't matter so much. But—" she paused and with a discouraged shake of her head, added, "you're so negative."

"Not negative when when it comes to pleasing you," put in the lawyer.

"Very well then," she sighed, "I suppose that I may as well begin by admitting that the plan has one great difference from any other plan I've ever had—probably a difference from most plans people tell you about here."

"Most people come to me after their plans have ceased to be plans and have become troubles."

"Well, I shan't have to do that," she declared buoyantly.

"I hope not. What's the plan?"

She turned full upon him a large, sober gaze.

Tipping back and forth in his desk chair he watched her, puzzling in what direction the wind of some new enthusiasm had now turned her singularly one-purposed mind. In her twenty-one ardent years that mind had been turned in several extraordinary directions. At sixteen her life was to be devoted to day nurseries; at seventeen she had wept bitterly because she was not permitted to pack her mother's black walnut furniture into perpetual storage and bundle off that placid and adipose woman for the rest of her days as chaperon for her as an art student abroad, and following her father's death she had selected a desolate and fever-stricken waste to which she believed she was called for the work of a missionary. Winter was still puzzling when her features broke in a laugh.

"I know it's absurd, Uncle Charles," she said gaily. "But the funny part of this plan—where it's different

—is that I can't tell you what the plan is. It wouldn't be fair."

"Fair to whom?"

"To Butler," she rejoined. "Even he doesn't know yet."

"What!" exclaimed Winter teasingly. "Secrets from your husband already? You surprise me, Janet! Where are those wonderful ideals of marriage you once explained so ardently?"

"I have them still," she affirmed vigorously. "Butler must know this first—like everything else. I haven't told him yet, but I shall at luncheon."

"And when will I know?"

"You'll be the very next one," promised Janet, as if bestowing a privilege, and added, "that is, if you are kind and reasonable."

"When have I failed you?"

"When I became engaged. You kept objecting frightfully."

"That was only for your own good. Anyway, I didn't object to Butler; it was only to his salary check. And what are you after now?"

"Money," she brought forth, "and a lot of it."

"Indeed!" said the lawyer ironically. "And so even my little Janet has turned materialist with the rest of the world."

"Not a bit of it!" she retorted warmly. "A materialist wants money for comfort, for luxury, for gratification. I don't. What I want money for is to be able to live a broad, full life—a life among the people

who are pushing the world ahead, a life that will make Butler and me the finer for having lived it, a life that will make Sonny a better man, a life that escapes small people, small thoughts, mediocrity. That's what I want money for. Now you understand?"

"Yes, Janet, I do," returned Winter, and sat silent, pulling at his chin and studying her. There was no doubt about it—she had a place apart. She was no namby-pamby child, no passive being, complacent as some weed, waiting for life to make her. Finally he asked:

"But how are you going to do all this—how do you think you can pick up all this money?"

"Oh, that's the secret!" she exclaimed, tossing back her head with a laugh.

"Well, then, if you won't tell me the plan, how precisely am I to help you along this road to larger things?" he questioned, good-humouredly, expanding upon the last words.

"I'll explain," she said brightly, and swung herself around in the chair so as to face him squarely. The smartness of her black-stockinged ankles and the rhythm and grace of her movement caught Winter's eye. "Do you remember the only other time I ever came here?" she asked.

The lawyer did. He had sent for her to explain the terms of a small legacy left to her by her father, Andrew Fielding. There was now a shade of alarm in his face as he nodded back to her.

"Well, you know what you told me then?"

"I think so—yes," returned Winter. "That you and your sister had these small legacies, and I'd take care of them for you."

"Exactly," said Janet. "And that they were ours—that we could have them when we wanted them."

"But, Janet!" cried the lawyer, getting to his feet. "You don't mean that you want your legacy! Why, my child, that's everything in the world you've got. That can't be what you're here for?"

"That is exactly what I'm here for, Uncle Charles," the girl replied, with a firm smile. "I want my legacy. I know you are very wonderful about money and I'm more than grateful for the way you've taken care of mine, but really, and please, Uncle Charles, don't be difficult—I must have it."

"But, my dear," protested the lawyer, throwing out his hands, "that legacy isn't much. It won't give you the things you want."

"Oh, yes it will," she replied, with a confident shake of her head. "Remember, you don't know my plan. It is honestly a remarkable idea. When you know, you will understand."

After a moment more of dumfounded scrutiny Winter sat down again, a grim smile upon his face.

"It's absurd, Janet. You can't tamper that way with money!"

"Tamper? Why do you say tamper?" she rejoined, with indignation.

"Disturbing well-invested funds is always tampering," declared the lawyer. "It's more than that; it's

criminal. Money is blood—nothing more nor less. It represents struggle, strain, infinite weariness, on somebody's part. To waste it is—"

"But I'm not going to waste it," cut in Janet, bringing a small, clinched hand down sharply on the edge of the desk.

"You almost certainly will," he affirmed. "The management and investment of money is a specialty about which you know nothing—no more than I know anything about bringing up a baby."

"But I'm not relying on myself or on my knowledge!" she exclaimed, wide-eyed, her high, clear forehead puckered in delicate lines.

"On whose knowledge, then?" he demanded, a little testily.

"Why, on Butler's, of course!" she replied, with a rising inflection of surprise followed by a complacent smile.

Winter fell silent; this was an impasse. He knew that he would never be able to dissuade Janet from the plan of withdrawing this legacy from his hands if he roused her resentment by questioning Butler's abilities. Of these abilities, he was aware, the girl had not the echo of a doubt; the call of her nature which made her idealise all things in her life had caused her to enshrine her husband. Any unwillingness to accept her estimate would surely excite her to a spirited defense.

As a matter of fact Winter knew little of Butler Pierce's general attainments. He was a well-tanned

young man, of twenty-five or -six, standing a straight six feet, who five years earlier, fresh from a college career financed by a distant uncle, had come to New York with a gold football on his watch-chain and a mystic pin on his vest and applied to Janet's father for a job. It was just before Andrew Fielding's death; and the lawyer recalled the weary smile of a sick man with which his friend had told him that he had found a place on the pay-roll of the paper firm of Pyncheon, Fielding & Styce for the young man. It was his form of protest, he had said, against a theory which bred in a boy a liking for English-cut clothes and made-to-order shoes and then shoved him, without money or mercy, into the economic machine. Aside from this, Winter's knowledge of Butler Pierce had extended only to the fact that he combed his hair back smartly from the side of his head and had a taking way of nodding sidewise, with a quick, cordial smile. The lawyer had put him down as belonging to that easily recognizable type one saw during business hours, hustling in and out of banks and offices, the young men in good clothes whom the colleges had dumped on the town. Some emerged; some didn't, and Butler's fate, the lawyer was certain, still hung in the balance. But all that, he reflected, could not be made clear to Janet. He selected another appeal.

"Do you realise, my dear," he began, at length, after much cogitating, "just how important this legacy might become to you if one or two unlucky things happened? Suppose, for example, Butler should die—sup-

pose he should be seized with an illness that kept him from work for a year. How could you manage?"

"More pessimism," retorted the girl promptly. "Butler is strong and the most healthy person I know. Don't raise gloomy pictures! Things like that don't happen. If we based life on all the catastrophes we can think up, we shouldn't get anywhere—never make plans—never go ahead."

"But, if anything unlucky like that should happen, what would you do?"

"Oh, manage somehow," declared Janet, with an airy wave of her hand.

"Live with your mother or sister?" queried the lawyer, watching her. "Be a dependent?"

"Of course not. You know me better than that!" she asserted positively.

"Well, what would you do? Just make the supposition for a moment. If Butler should die where would you turn for enough to support you and the baby?" he persisted.

"To the income of the legacy, naturally," she retorted.

"But if the legacy is gone?"

"It won't be gone. There is the whole point!" she cried. "Why don't you suggest the possibility that I'll take the money and in six months have twice as much?"

"That's the kind of an outcome you foresee?" he questioned.

"Why, certainly," she rejoined brightly. "In six

months, Uncle Charles, you will see that I was right. No, there is just one outcome, only one."

Winter was puzzled. There was a long silence, during which she watched him patiently and he continued to smile. A sudden thought presently came to him.

"Are you two young people in debt?" he asked abruptly.

"Of course not," promptly shot back Janet, and there was surprise and indignation in her voice. "How could you ask? No! There is nothing of that kind."

"Well, you perfectly well might be, on the income you have," Winter interrupted, turning his glance away from her for a second. "Rather than have you touch your legacy, your mother might help you out this time."

"Uncle Charles!" she gasped. They looked at each other. Colour mounted to Janet's face. "Let mother help us? Borrow? Oh, never!" And she shook her head as she added, "We'll never come to that."

"Well, my dear, those things are sometimes necessary," he said in a mollifying tone, "especially when people are beginning and are young."

"Not for us!" she cut in decisively, with a show of feeling, and the tall, slim feather mounting from her cockade hat bobbed several times with the vigour of her affirmation. There was a pause during which Winter was deliberating at what point he would next test her armour. She was the first to speak, however.

"Please, Uncle Charles—please," she begged.

"Don't make things so hard—so difficult. You are doing exactly what you did before—exactly what I wanted you to promise not to do!"

There was nothing that Winter more disliked than opposing Janet. Now, as he studied her from beneath his half-closed lids, his head tipped back, it seemed doubly hard. That sense of fresh and fragrant youth which she so strongly gave to him; that eagerness and enthusiasm which she expressed in every turn of her head and in every look; that tender innocence in her eye; that intensity which became, according to success or failure, either exultant triumph or the most heart-broken, bitter tears—all made appeal to his imagination and he realised what a part this spiritualised young animal played in the somewhat grey existence of a middle-aged bachelor which he led. Her small flash of resentment had passed, and she was looking to him with eyes large with entreaty.

"My dear little girl," he began, frowning to hide emotion, "you know—you must know—that there is nothing that I more desire than to please you; nothing except one thing. That one thing is to safeguard you; keep you from your own headstrong, impetuous self. Janet, you're so young—so very young, and you burn so for life. You expect so much—so much of others, so much of yourself; particularly of yourself, I think. You've never learned that every one, sooner or later, will fail you and that you've got to take them, even the nearest and dearest, and love and cherish them just the same. You believe that human beings act

invariably from motives of love and kindness; that others are as honest as yourself; that everything will some way—somehow—come right in the end; that—”

“But things will, Uncle Charles. They must. They do!” she exclaimed passionately.

“Perhaps,” the lawyer returned, with a short, embarrassed laugh. “But after fifty years, I doubt it; and when I see you, like all young people who are in the least worth while, plunging ahead, I tremble. I’m trembling for you now. You’re a high-powered engine, and if you smash, if you—”

“I suppose you mean by all this,” Janet began crisply, “that it is foolish in me to take the legacy and that I’ll surely end up by doing something foolish.”

“Exactly,” nodded Winter; “and more than that I want you to see what may be the particular tragedy of a delicate, finely constructed thing like you. Your very idealism, your best qualities, may ruin you, frightfully twist you—in a spiritual sense, I mean. There is your peril—the peril of having trust turned to suspicion, of faith turned to doubt, of love to bitterness, of smiles turned to sneers, of ideals turned—well, to something at which you will just shrug your shoulders. Now do you see?”

“I see,” said Janet, after a thoughtful pause. “Well, there are two answers to all you’ve said. One is that I can’t—I simply can’t—tell myself that the world is the ugly, dreary place you picture it. I haven’t the capacity, the ability to think that it is. To me that’s impossible—that’s all! And the second

answer"—and now she sent him a quick, flashing smile before she said, "and the second answer is—that you don't know the scheme! And that, my dear Uncle Charles, makes all the difference."

"Does it?" he asked, with a grin that pushed back the heavy lines on his dull cheeks. "I wish I could think so!"

"Well, you must think so!" she admonished cheerfully. And then, with a good-humoured pout, "And now, how about the legacy?"

He smiled at the futility of his philosophising; at the difficulty of bequeathing the bitterly-earned shekels of experience to another. It struck him that in Janet's case it was an impossibility. He shrank from taking refuge in the citadel of his position as guardian and family adviser and friend. That meant simply flat refusal to meet her request—an unpleasant, stormy time with her. But there seemed no other course.

"Come, Uncle Charles," she urged.

"No," he declared firmly, "I can't do it, Janet—I mustn't. I was your father's closest friend, and I'm your best friend and guardian and—" He brought his hands with a slap to his knees and then, as if to give emphasis to his decision, got up and took a turn across the rug before he spoke, "and it won't do. It's utter folly. No, Janet, I can't let you take your legacy," he declared again.

He stopped in front of her. She put an elbow on the arm of her chair and rested her chin in her palm. There were two troubled lines between her fine drawn,

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delicate brows. Clearly enough, she was thinking hard.

"Please, Uncle Charles," she said in final entreaty and looked up.

"No, Janet."

He was about to drop into his seat when she spoke again. She had raised her head, and he caught both the childlike quiver of her lips and the distress in her eyes.

"You seem to forget, Uncle Charles," she said very quietly, "that I'm of age—that the money's n. n."

The tone in which the words were spoken told Winter that they were deliberate; that as a last expedient she had had recourse to her rights. Winter experienced an odd sense of pain and of loneliness. Walking to the window, he stood there with his back to her. Of course she did not know of the hours of dreary work he had expended to secure for her a maximum yield on her meagre fund. If she had, he told himself, gratitude might have stayed her determination. But then youth never did understand. So much came to youth in the mere course of events, as it were. And he knew that she did not even guess what this withdrawing, this ducking out from beneath his shielding arm, meant to him.

"Ah, well," he sighed to himself, and then turning about, said to her:

"Certainly, my dear, if you rest your request on that ground—make it a demand—I can't refuse."

He saw her face shadow with unhappiness.

"I do hope you'll understand," she pleaded, with brimming eyes, "understand that you have my love and affection just as much as ever. None of it's gone—none of it." She stopped and with a dolorous little smile, added: "It's hard all around, but, Uncle Charles—it simply had to be done."

She ended with a warm smile. He smiled in return; his ache was somewhat healed. "It's all right, Janet," he declared; "I do understand. Maybe in a strange way I'm glad that you are the kind of girl that would do what you have done. You can't grasp that, I imagine. Anyhow, I'll go about the business of liquidating your securities—selling them, you know—and I ought to be able to send you a check within, say, ten days or two weeks."

"Ten days or two weeks!" she cried, bending sharply toward him. "But I want it today! I must have it now!" And she stared at him in as wide-eyed astonishment as if he had suddenly lost his wits. Winter on his part was simply blank.

"Today!" he exclaimed. "Ridiculous!"

Distressing possibilities came to his mind; oily-haired promoters with rubber stocks; beneficent old gentlemen with land developments under silk hats; the whole eager-fingered crew to whom delay was catastrophe.

"No, not ridiculous," she was saying impatiently. "You said I could have the legacy when I wanted it. I want it today."

"But, my dear," he protested, nonplussed, "an ex-

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ecutor doesn't have to convert a legacy and pay it on an hour's notice. It's never done. It often takes weeks months. Don't you understand—"

"I understand only one thing—that you said I could have the money when I called for it," she injected, "and I am calling for it now."

"But it's invested!"

"Does that make any difference? Isn't it in a bank somewhere?" she asked, with a simple, questioning look.

"No. It's in stocks—high-grade preferred stocks," he explained.

"Oh!" she said. "Well, can't you send and get it for me?"

"Of course not! The stocks must be sold. We must wait until the market is right." She looked at him bewildered.

"Oh, Uncle Charles, I don't understand at all," she cried in despair. "You said I could have the money when I wanted it, and I thought you meant that. So I came down to get it. Can't I have it? You're clever." She glanced at a tiny watch beneath the spirited green cuff of her linen suit. "And please hurry. I've only half an hour before I meet Butler."

Winter collapsed into his chair. His wrists dangled, and he shook his head helplessly.

"Remember what you said," she prodded.

"Very well," he declared, disgusted; "it's not because there is any reason why I should pay the money to you today, but because I'm not up to the task of making

you understand that what you ask is absurd, absolutely absurd."

His hand went to a drawer at the side of his desk. For a time he figured on the edge of his wide check-book and then with the swish of a line and the scratch of a signature, drew his check.

"There, my young lady," he remarked caustically, "I'm buying those securities from you myself at their current values." He held the check toward her. Again her eyes went wide; again her lips parted; in a high rising key she spoke:

"But—but—I wanted—I want cash, you know. I must have cash!"

She did not reach for the check, and he continued to hold the slip of paper, trembling in his hand. They studied each other, she leaning forward, dismay in her expression; he rigidly erect. Winter felt that it was far beyond the range of his imagination to conceive the extreme of folly to which his young protégée must be rushing. Such a proceeding, demanding the payment of a legacy of several thousand dollars, not only instantaneously, but in cash, bespoke a venture outside all ordinary channels of business. For a moment he was tempted to make a final plea with her, but checked himself. She had made her determination clear; from now on she would brave the world on her own account. If she were going to have her legacy at all, small difference it was if she got it in cash. He broke the silence with a mirthless laugh and dropping his hand, touched a bell. Very soberly, during a brief wait, the

lawyer turned the check over and over. His mouth was pursed up, and he was wondering how long it would be before Janet would again be confronting him from that chair. Meanwhile the girl's eyes, full of distress, were resting on his face.

"Please, Uncle Charles, don't be that way," she whispered, the corners of her mouth soft with entreaty. "You won't feel so when you know the plan," she added.

The secretary appeared. "Byrnes," directed Winter, thrusting the check at him, "take Mrs. Pierce to the bank and get this money for her in cash." Janet had risen and was standing before him, fresh as spring.

"Wait until you know, Uncle Charles," she beamed.

"Wait until *you* know, Janet," he rejoined.

And she went out.

CHAPTER II

JANET CONCEIVES A PLAN

MEADOWHEDGE was a modest and inexpensive offshoot of fashionable Tuckerton. It was composed of a cluster of a half-dozen Americanised Queen Ann cottages, with slightly weather-beaten stucco walls, and lay around the semicircle of a cinder driveway at the bottom of a sheer declivity, from a much travelled thoroughfare above. All the houses had large living-rooms, high fireplaces, and windows that divided perpendicularly in the middle and opened out. Leading down from the road was a long flight of stone steps, arched over with rose-vines. People rushing by in motors would exclaim, looking down, "How cute!" And up on the high hill beyond, where Tuckerton lay, the settlement was known as "Brides' Park." It was here that Janet Pierce and her husband lived.

All the dwellers in Meadowhedge, except the Pierces, were excessively neighbourly. Soon after Butler and Janet had arrived there, a year and a half before, the other husbands and wives had, in pairs, descended upon them with the declaration that they all must be great friends, because the neighbourliness and friendliness of the place was so much of its charm. But the Pierces

did not play bridge nor care particularly for Meadowhedge picnics and gossip, and latterly Janet had devised the plan of extinguishing the lights in the living-room in the evenings to discourage visitors from the houses near by.

There was enough in her life, she felt, without Meadowhedge friendships. There were Butler's homecomings, the baby's dimples, the maid's extravagances, her sister's porcelains, her mother's exercises, keeping the lawn cut, shifting furniture, cleaning curtains, books on child culture—other kindred interests which made up for her the immersing and placid routine into which, more and more since her marriage, she had been slipping.

The day before her visit to Charles Winter's office opened as placidly as the three hundred days preceding it. In the morning she kissed her husband good-bye and, from their narrow porch, watched him bound up the steps to the roadway. She then ran upstairs to the task of starting her child's day, reflecting as she bent over its crib, that there was really no one so adorable in all he did, as her husband, even to the matter of going up steps. And there was a glow of delight upon her cheeks when, in the midst of powdering and rubbing the boy, she became convinced that its ears were shaping themselves more like Butler's every day. These reflections, plus high spirits at the very joy of being alive, resulted in her arriving with the baby at eleven o'clock before the doors of the public library, and, because of the pace at which she had come,

the infant was bobbing up and down on the goose-neck springs of its carriage.

Before she descended the steps with a book entitled "Child Culture, III, Years Six-Eight," beneath her arm, something had gone wrong. From the recess of the carriage hood screams poured forth. Shortly thereafter she arrived home, checking off in her mind, with acute distress, all recorded causes of infant wailings. She puzzled over the riddle of the child's cries until she drew up her chair to her lonely lunch, but, then propping her book against the sugar bowl, she dismissed the problem with the conclusion that Butler Pierce, Jr., had howled simply because he particularly disliked being left alone.

Following her luncheon and an hour spent on the couch in the living-room, in the study of child culture, she found herself driven by a fresh access of her morning energy. Establishing the maid-of-all-work in the hall, over the potato pan, and with an ear for the child asleep upstairs, she set out for a walk. Climbing the Tuckerton hill, up to the very crest, where the house with the gargoyle knocker stood, she struck off briskly from there, back through the woods and down into the town. This brought her home in ample time to present herself, fresh in a white dress with an orange sash and a wide-brimmed hat, upon the platform of the railroad station at six-thirty.

As usual she caught sight of Butler, his newspaper rolled in his hand, before the locomotive had come abreast of her. She waved to him, contemptuous of an

amused grin from the crowd, massed behind her husband on the car steps. He hopped from the train and still trying to check his run, came to her side. She slipped her arm through his. Together they waited at the edge of the flagstone walk until the dust behind the last motor bringing up the swift procession that was wheeling off to the big estates on Tuckerton hill, had settled. Then they set off together for Meadowhedge, dragging their feet in leisurely rhythm.

They went in to dinner well after seven o'clock. Butler, in the meantime, had freshened and donned a white flannel suit. He was finding his place at one side of the round fumed oak table, and Janet had paused to straighten a hunting print which hung near the door. The maid was bringing in plates of cooled consommé.

"I got a letter from the renting agent today," remarked Butler casually, and dropped into his chair. "He sent a form for the renewal of the lease. Our term is up October first, you know."

"Well, we don't want to move, that's certain," declared Janet.

"No, I suppose not," acquiesced Butler.

"I wouldn't move for worlds," she said emphatically. "We couldn't be happier anywhere than we are here—not possibly—"

"How about the neighbours?" he smiled.

"Oh, they're trained now," she laughed gaily. "Do you know, I think it was a horrible shock to them to discover that married people could be as complete as

we are—that we didn't need them nor any one else?"

"I dare say," returned her husband, and added, "and it's a nuisance to start fresh anywhere. No, this place suits. I'll sign up soon."

Janet did not reply. She found that she was absorbed in the discovery that the gray of Butler's eyes was more wonderful at dusk than at any other time and particularly when he wore a white flannel suit. "Tell me about your day," she said, smiling remotely. "What happened?"

"Oh, I don't know," returned Butler mildly, "nothing much!"

"Something must have happened," she urged.

"Well, let's see," he said, toying with a spoon and looking down reflectively. "I sold three hundred dollars' worth of paper today."

"Good!" exclaimed the girl. "I'm so glad!"

"It was English machine," he added. Janet wondered what kind of paper that might be, but did not ask, contenting herself with the reflection that her husband was an efficient man.

"Anything else?" she pursued.

"No—no, I don't think so," he replied. "The train this morning was four minutes late. They ought to do something about this service."

"It's hard on business men, isn't it?"

"Rather," Butler rejoined, and there was a pause until Janet asked:

"Who did you lunch with?"

"Harsen—he's the assistant manufacturing man."

"Oh," observed the girl. The name signified merely a dim figure in her husband's world. There was another silence. This time Butler spoke.

"That must have been a great game today at the Polo Grounds," he began and had elucidated at considerable length when there came to them from the roadway above the roar of an open cut-out, and in a second more the scrunch of a car lowering itself down the cinder drive to Meadowhedge. They both leaned forward, peering through the window; dusk had passed and it had grown almost dark. In a sweep of headlights the machine was rounding to the door.

"Ah, there, Butler!" came from in front.

"It's Julian!" exclaimed Butler, pushing back his chair.

"Hooray!" cried Janet, and followed her husband through the screen door to the porch.

Julian Powell was the family friend. He had begun by being Butler's friend in college. They had discovered each other before their first year was up. Their interests, standards, ambitions, and circumstances had been much the same. Each had wanted to do well in his work—not too well, for that would indicate an undue absorption in the socially unrecognized side of college; but well enough so as not to be in ill-repute at the dean's office. Each had wanted collegiate "position," officeships, admiration from underclassmen, and a certain fraternity pin. Each had had about the same

financial equipment. Before four years were up the same mystic and coveted emblem had come to both of them; Julian had managed the football team; Butler had played upon it. Both had been "successes."

In the city they had begun by living at the same boarding-house. But, shortly before the time when Butler had married, Julian had found his fortunes sufficiently improved to justify taking a bachelor apartment. It was at this stage that Janet had first seen Powell. Butler had brought him, late one afternoon, to the Fielding home. She had come down the hall and as she drew aside the curtains she saw him, wearing a red neck-tie and his hair very sleek, bending over a photograph on the centre table. It had been evident they had not heard her approach. "She's a darling. Who is it?" Julian had asked. "That's me," Janet had laughed before Butler could speak. Since then Janet had felt that Powell had grown to be very much her friend, too.

When she and Butler were married, it was Julian, with a dazzling smartness to his clothes, who had stood at the end of the altar rail as best man. It was his card that had been attached to the box of roses, almost as tall as herself, which she had found in the hall a month later, when they had first come to their already settled home; and, finally, it was he who, with a white carnation in his buttonhole, had risen up to accept the responsibilities of a god-father to their child. Anniversaries, birthdays, and family dates were unfailingly

marked by an express package from Julian, and in between times he sent Janet books or invited them to dinner in town.

When he came to Meadowhedge, which was often, he talked stocks to Butler, and Butler talked football tactics to him; or they would scheme ways and means of advancing one another's careers. Janet knew that, at Julian's request, her husband had introduced him to her rich brother-in-law, John Tremont, and that at about the same time he had received from the firm for which Powell worked, a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar order for the kind of paper that Butler said was used in business circulars.

If Janet was ever asked what was Julian's business, she covered her vagueness by replying that he was a "broker" or that he was in "Wall Street." Neither phrase conveyed much meaning to her. She had no pictures of what his routine might be, the kind of people he might talk with, what was reckoned real achievement in his field of activity. Some people were simply brokers and Julian happened to be one of them; and as for being "in Wall Street," whenever a man seemed to have money and there was no visible means of explaining his riches, Janet believed he was in "Wall Street."

When, upon this August night, following her husband, Janet reached the porch, her eye went straight to a brilliant patch of light, showing a formidable battery of levers, shifts, and gauges at the end of a shiny, nickel steering-rod. Then she detected as she cleared

the steps at a bound, the long streamer of a woman's motor-veil.

"Come out here," cried Julian. "I've a couple of novelties. This," he continued as Butler and Janet were hurrying down the short path, "is Mrs. Reynolds, and if you'll take her inside you'll see she's a peach." At which a woman, with a graceful jump, alighted on the edge of the lawn and held out her hand.

"And this," went on Powell in his deliberate, modulated tones, "as you have doubtless perceived, is a new car."

"But why did you get a new one, Julian?" exclaimed Janet in surprise.

"That's a very long story," rejoined Powell, unlimbering himself from his seat and getting out. "But look at it! Isn't that car its own excuse?"

Janet stepped back. An automobile to her was a delightfully but hopelessly complicated piece of mechanism. If it had heavy axles and was bright and seemingly well cared for it was, so far as she knew, a good car. At any rate, although the clock, the tiny speedometer, the covering of the seat, the details and trimmings interested her mildly, the workings of the clutch or carburetor meant nothing to her. Evidently, however, Butler wanted to peer around, and so she made way for him. He wriggled the steering wheel and gripped the gear shift. The thought was passing in Janet's mind that curiosity concerning machinery was a purely masculine trait and she was about to turn to Mrs. Reynolds

when, for just an instant, her attention was caught and held.

Butler had leaned across the lighted pit of the car to test the foot brake. As he had reached out his hand, his face had come into the full glare of the encased bulbs. It was a very simple, swift movement, accomplished in a second. But in that second Janet had caught an odd, new twist in his expression—a tightness, a strange cramped compactness, under his cheek bone and around his eyes. There was scarcely time to analyze the look. Butler, with all that richness in his voice which invariably struck a chord within her, was saying:

"Isn't it a beauty! Really, Julian, it's a wonder."

"Surely it is; but do come into the house," urged Janet, leading the way ahead of Mrs. Reynolds and her husband, while Powell lingered behind, running his gloveless hand critically along the rim of the radiator.

"Stunning little place, Mrs. Pierce," exclaimed Mrs. Reynolds as soon as they had entered the living-room and the lights were switched on.

Butler was behind her, his arms up to receive the long pongee motor-coat which the visitor was unloosing.

"Wish I could find something like it," she went on, sweeping the walls in a glance. "It's frightful being cooped in a tiny flat in town. Still, I suppose that's the fate of my kind."

"Your kind?" queried Butler, taking the motor-coat and folding it carefully over the back of a chair.

"Yes; paupers, you know," declared Mrs. Reynolds.

"You see, I'm one of those people who can never afford anything. Isn't that fireplace nice? And I do like your fine old table, Mrs. Pierce. Really, this is charming. Dear me! Well, I suppose I must forget about it. I could never make it go. No doubt my landlord is taking advantage this very minute of my jaunt with Julian to put my piano and cat into the street."

"I hope nothing so bad as that," put in Janet ingenuously.

"Oh, I shouldn't wonder," Mrs. Reynolds rattled on cheerfully. Butler was watching her with amused interest.

"Rent's one thing I can't keep up with. I never could. For years I have been convinced that my greatest need was a kindly soul who would provide it. You're the man, Julian," she concluded, turning to Powell, as he came in.

"Nothing would please me more," he said, throwing open his duster and disclosing his suit of black and white checks. "But remember, if you talk that way here Mrs. Pierce will put you out. Won't you, Janet?" He crossed the room to her side.

"I don't think Mrs. Reynolds is very serious," she contributed, with a friendly glance for Julian's friend. Butler was digging into his coat pocket to find cigarettes.

"I don't know why you should say that," rejoined Mrs. Reynolds promptly. "I was serious—never more serious in my life." Then to Powell she said, "But,

honestly, aren't these little houses nice? They are so different—have a real air about them."

"Certainly," put in Julian, with a bow; "Janet lives in one of them."

"I was just telling Mrs. Pierce I wanted one," retorted Mrs. Reynolds, examining her long and sharply-pointed finger nails. Julian chuckled.

"What! You want one of these!" he exclaimed. "You make me laugh, Lotta"; and then turning, gracefully: "Pay no attention to her, Janet; she is posing outrageously. She is a hopeless city person; I'm quite sure she was weaned on cocktails and begun crawling to a dance tune. Take her for more than twenty-four hours into country air and she'd strangle."

"She'd strangle here, anyhow," came from Butler, who was holding his cigarettes toward Julian. "This is the most intimate place in the world. The houses are so close together that we can hear our neighbours turn over in bed."

"Don't put those cigarettes away, please," begged Mrs. Reynolds of Butler. She met him halfway across the room and secured one. "You don't mind, do you?" she asked Janet while she was in the very act of bending forward to the match her host held up.

"Not in the least!" replied Janet, who could not help but notice how bewitchingly the other, to avoid all danger of singeing the front of her hair, tilted her head. "Isn't she nice!" the girl whispered enthusiastically to Julian while Mrs. Reynolds and Butler

dallied over the cigarette. "Tell me about her. Who is she?"

"Oh, anybody—anybody at all," replied Powell, turning upon her, for only a second, a constrained, enigmatic smile. The girl considered this rejoinder but made no reply; instead, she spoke across the room to Mrs. Reynolds.

"It's funny," she said, "that we've never seen you at any of Julian's parties. They are awfully jolly; it would have been fun, wouldn't it?"

"Fun?" jeered Mrs. Reynolds. "It would have been fun if you'd been there. But I've been once and—never again." She paused, ribboned smoke, and smiled before she resumed: "I tell you that if Julian ever gets me a second time he will have learned a lot of new tricks of persuasion or found a new set of guests. I didn't know you'd ever been." She turned to Powell. "Julian, I'm ashamed of you. Taking two nice things like the Pierces to your awful parties!"

"My parties aren't awful," protested Julian in his quiet voice. "I'm surprised that you think so, Lotta; and I remember distinctly going to no end of trouble to find a well-rated and rich beau for you. You're unappreciative!"

"Oh, yes! I remember, too," retorted Mrs. Reynolds, coming over in front of Janet and gesturing vivaciously with her cigarette. "Would you believe it, Mrs. Pierce—that man was so fat that he had to sit a foot—a full twelve inches—I give you my word—further back from the table than any of the rest of

us? I looked at the chairs and it was all of that, and maybe more. And there was something else! Oh, Julian, that was a splendid pick—one of your most charming selections. It is a fact, Mrs. Pierce, that that man never spoke three words to me—not three words—except behind his hand—so.” She put her own small hand to demonstrate. “No, Julian, my dear, you won’t catch me again.”

“Well, anyway, I like his dinners,” came loyally from Janet.

“I dare say,” agreed Mrs. Reynolds, “and I suppose that if I get really hungry I may fall. But I should have to be very hungry. Of course Julian’s the head waiter’s darling; there’s no doubt of that. But his crowd—” She threw up her hands and wrinkled her narrow nose. In the shaded light of the room her olive skin was rich and glowing.

“My dinners aren’t so frightful, and all this is most unkind, Lotta,” took up Powell suavely. “I’ll stand no more. Come on, Janet. Let these two abuse me. I want to demonstrate the car for you.”

Perhaps it was because of Mrs. Reynolds’ irrepressible gaiety and good humour; perhaps it was a quality of lively cheerfulness, a pert indifference to the sharp edges of existence; perhaps it was her ease and sure-footedness, but, in any event, Janet liked her.

The girl, her hands crammed into a top-coat of Butler’s, was puzzling over Julian’s characterization of Mrs. Reynolds as they slipped through the village, passed the red bulb in the pharmacy window and

rounded the fountain opposite the railroad station. The gears clicked softly and they shot up the dark, wall-lined hill, heavy shafts of yellow-white light dusting before them.

"I don't see quite what you mean by saying Mrs. Reynolds is 'anybody at all,'" she remarked finally.

"Well, let me see—what do I mean?" drawled Powell. "I'm not sure that I know myself, unless it is that—well, that it would be very difficult to explain her exactly to you."

"And why to me?" queried Janet, glancing sideways, her brows up.

"Well, she's so different!" he parried.

"How different?"

"Well," with a dry laugh, "you're a wife and you're finding your life over there in Meadowhedge with your husband. She's a wife and she's finding her life in the Tenderloin without her husband."

"Are they divorced?" asked Janet, and the thought came to her that an acquaintanceship with a divorcée would be a new experience for her.

"No, not divorced," returned Julian. "He married her out of nowhere—out of that wilderness west of Hoboken—and then proceeded to drink himself beyond any possible social pale. Nice trick he served her! Disappeared—and left her stranded in Broadway with nothing but a bunch of bounders for friends and no chance for a divorce." He paused thoughtfully and added: "It's a wonder that she is as decent as she is!"

"Well, I like her—like her immensely," affirmed Janet. "I wonder—is she really as poor as she says she is?"

"She's not as poor as she says she is, but she's poor—poor, that is, for a person who needs a lot of money to be happy."

"Isn't that silly?" exclaimed Janet. "To need a lot of money to be happy."

"Think so?" he asked indulgently. Both fell silent, and the girl settled herself a little lower in the seat. Her eyes followed the steady spot of light which they seemed to pursue. She caught the evening smells from the overhanging trees and dark hedges and moist fields. Signposts, whitewashed roadside stones, an occasional pedestrian, leaped with amazing suddenness into view and flashed again into darkness in the rear.

"You know," Julian finally began in his soothing, steadying tones, "it was rather an accident—my bringing Lotta out tonight. It came about because I had a dinner engagement with her and something happened—it was only settled this afternoon—something which I wanted you to be the first to know about."

"Something pleasant?" asked Janet eagerly.

"Very, but it's a secret."

"I can tell Butler?" she demanded quickly.

"Oh yes, tell him," smiled Powell, and paused reflectively. She watched his cleanly modeled profile. It told her nothing, and she waited.

"Janet," he said at length, and with a seriousness that was new in him, "don't put me down as a brag-

gart; just let me talk to you because you're a dear friend—"

"A very best friend," supplied the girl enthusiastically.

"But ever since I went to boarding-school," he resumed, "ever since I discovered that at every stage of life there was a game to play, I've somehow managed to get what I wanted. I got it in school, where they made me the head boy; I got it in college—you know, Butler and I together."

She nodded proudly, brightly.

"So far I've got the things I've gone after," he went on, "and I think I shall always be able to get them. But, anyway, now, after five years, I've made my killing—got the thing I went after—in the game I've been playing—in the big New York game."

"The New York game?" echoed Janet, sitting straighter.

"Yes, the New York game," repeated Julian. "I don't know whether you've figured it out. Girls generally don't, and I'm not sure that even Butler knows; but it's the most dazzling, fascinating game in the world. It's business—everything in New York is business. The more you learn about the city the better you'll understand that there's the mainspring; business of some sort."

"Oh no, Julian," laughed Janet. "Not everything!"

"Yes, everything," he declared, his glance ahead.

"Why, I know a man who has capitalised to the extent of many millions an atrociously bad reputation as a rounder. That's not interesting except as it shows how far the thing can go. If you look sharply enough you can always find a dollar mark blown in the glass. Accept this principle, have that key, and you'll understand why So-and-So is always in the newspaper social columns, why another man is invited to a certain dinner, why the wife of some one else sits on the outside and not the inside of some opera-box. Perfect bores get elected to the best clubs, and incompetents are always heading certain charities. Back of it all is business; some one is trying to make money out of some one else. It's a huge lay-out. You're either in it or you're a victim."

"Oh!" exclaimed Janet, mystified, and the car swept softly along the smooth, oiled roadway.

"Well," went on Powell quietly, "long ago I decided that it was not my rôle in life to be a victim. Besides, there were a lot of things I wanted. For one thing, I wanted a car exactly like this, and I've wanted to go in for a sport of a real kind, like that yacht club racing, smaller classes, of course. I've wanted a different kind of apartment. Most of all, I think I've wanted success—success and position, so that I could begin to play this business game I've been talking about and really become a part of it." He studied her for a second before he added: "There are other things I've wanted—things of a different kind—finer things, perhaps; but I think that at last most of these

things I've been talking about are—well, they're a little more than in sight. They're almost in hand."

"Really, Julian! What in the world has happened?" she exclaimed, bending toward him.

"You asked me why I bought this new car," he went on deliberately. "I bought it to celebrate. Just to convince myself that it was real, that I'm not in a trance. And the strange part of it is that you and Butler had a big hand in bringing all this about—you really did!" he concluded, with another rapid turn of his head toward her.

Janet gasped in surprise and started to speak; but he quickly concluded: "To put it in one quick word—I've been made a partner in the firm, and getting that Tremont account had more to do with it than anything else."

Janet's chief feeling was of pleasure that Julian had wanted Butler and her to be the first to know; the consciousness of a close friendship was warming. She was glad, too, that Butler's help in introducing Julian to her brother-in-law had meant so much, had turned out so successfully. But the news did not signify much to her. He was still just a "broker"; he was still merely "in Wall Street." All that the news meant was that he was doing well, progressing. But then, of course, all of her friends did well, progressed. Her father had "got on"; Charles Winter was known as a successful man. It was perfectly natural and normal that men should be growing and attaining; it was like gaining weight

when one was a child—every one gained and nobody thought much about it.

"Will you do any different work?" she inquired politely.

They were heading off smoothly between two blurred lines of sawed-rail fence.

"No—only more of it," returned Julian briefly.

"Oh, that's too bad!" she rejoined. "But I'll tell Butler the news. I'm sure he'll be delighted." She settled back to luxuriate in the cool, fragrant air which was striking her cheeks. The night fascinated her, and all her senses were keenly alive. The only sound was the low, unbroken whirr of the motor. After a time Julian spoke.

"No, Janet, it isn't too bad," he said slowly, with a shake of his head. "Nothing so completely changes a man's point of view as getting into business in some way on his own account. We were talking about those dinners. Just take them for an example. From now on, no more eight-dollar champagne, no Belgian hare straight from Belgium. That's done! Before it didn't make the least difference to me whether the head waiter's tip was five or ten dollars. It makes all the difference in the world now. Before, it went into the expense account; it was the other fellow's money. Now it's mine, too. Every cent I can cut down on those flash occasions is so much more in my own pocket. In the future I'll be ordering lamb, and there'll be a straight ten per cent. for the waiters. And, as for work—if you once get out of the employee class you

don't mind how much work you do. I'll double my hours. It is going to be fun, not work. No, Janet, nothing turns a man right around like getting in among the real people—among the employers, the fellows who play the big and interesting game of New York. No one can ever play it from the hired-man place. That's what this partnership means—fun, instead of work, getting in with the crowd that's worth while, and a lot more things beside, with this car already here."

In the middle of this speech Janet had begun to sit rigid. Before he had finished she had bent forward slightly and was peering with burning, lustrous eyes at Powell. When he concluded she felt as if she had been dealt a sharp blow on the head. Her mouth was dry, and the fingers of both hands were buried tight in her palms. A bewildering numbness came over her brain as it was stormed by a tumult of thoughts in headlong confusion—college success; success in New York; the mystic pins; what only a thousand persons in a million understood; the larger game, its fascination, its rewards; that look in Butler's face—houses, yachts, motors; the employer class; being a hired man; the fun of it all—with the world gloriously, beautifully, marvellously, endlessly, and instantly opening out. It was paralysing.

"How do you get into business for yourself?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, in various ways," he returned casually, squinting at the road ahead of him. "I know only two—work and capital."

"Capital?" she echoed. She seemed to recognize that term.

"Yes—money, you know. You can do anything with that. Play the big game or do anything else," he replied unconcernedly, busy with the gears on the other side of the car.

They dropped down into a low-hanging mist, cold and white-grey. They bumped and rumbled over a wooden bridge, and shooting up the opposite hill, swept smoothly away to the steady hum of the machine. Janet wanted to stand up and shout; leap from the car and race madly ahead of it; embrace Julian—anything to ease the wild, driving, brain-racking sensation of ecstasy and impatience which had seized her.

What she did was to relax in her seat and fold her hands quietly in her lap; then after a moment she said quietly: "Don't you think, Julian, we'd better turn here?"

It was the next day that she visited Charles Winter's office.

Whenever Janet came to town before mid-day Butler lunched with her. They generally made something of a treat of it and went to an uptown restaurant. Now she was sitting on a red-plush sofa, opposite the doorway, scanning each face as it appeared. Twice she went to the entrance and searched agonizingly in both directions along the street.

She tried to watch the groups around. Flush-faced men, with lighted cigarettes, came lolling from the bar; agitated, red-lipped women hurried up the steps. Undersized, pasty-skinned boys in uniforms kept dodging in and out, gathering hats and sticks; the doors of telephone booths kept opening and closing; head waiters kept appearing from the dining-room, beckoning and smiling; a noisy dance tune beat out. Janet found that she had no interest in a spectacle so bizarre.

Half an hour ago she passed out of Charles Winter's room. She smiled cheerfully at the remembrance of the interview and reflected that even if her guardian were devoid of imagination, initiative, and enthusiasm, he really was remarkably kind. She wondered what Charles Winter was thinking at the moment. The reflection of how completely all his misgivings would evaporate when he learned her plan, consoled her.

Indeed, Janet's conception of the wonderfulness of the scheme, with each minute, was flourishing. Her imagination fairly ravished the idea. She remembered, too, that she had once heard her father observe that every man who was "worth his salt" should be in business on his own account. Now, as she waited, she could not understand why either she or Butler had not thought of the plan long ago. It was so obvious, so exactly the thing from every point of view, that she was half afraid he might think of it himself before he arrived. If he did, then, of course, he would come in as much ablaze with the big idea as she was herself. But upon the dot of one Butler sauntered in, cool and immacu-

late in a grey flannel suit and a straw hat with a blue and white band. Obviously he was untormented by any violent urge. Janet sprang up.

"Shall we go right in?" she asked forthwith.

He nodded, and handed his hat to a check boy.

"Two," he said to the bowing waiter at the door.

"And, please, put us off to one side; somewhere where we will be alone"; interjected Janet as she searched across the crowded tables.

"Too much noise, my dear?" asked her husband. She did not answer. They zigzagged around the backs of chairs to a place by the wall. Janet slipped quickly into her seat, hugging her treasure bag to her lap. Butler glanced leisurely about before he sat down and spread his napkin. The waiter presented a card and stood by his shoulder, pad in hand.

"What shall it be, Janet?" her husband asked leisurely. "Clams, melon, bouillon?"

"Yes! Yes! Anything at all!" she returned, keeping her hands beneath the cloth. "You order. Not much! I'm not hungry!"

He glanced up at her from the card; she turned her head.

"Nice melon today," prompted the waiter.

"Well, suppose we have some of that—yes, that would be nice," said Butler reflectively. "And the fish? What good fish have you?"

"Let me see," the waiter was drawling out, rolling his eyes, a pencil at his lips. Janet cut in briskly:

"Bring us some melons, cold salmon, and iced coffee. That's all. Now hurry!"

The waiter departed; her husband gazed at her, puzzled.

"Butler!" she cried and caught the bewilderment in his eyes. "Can't you guess what's happened?" He shook his head and stared.

"Has nothing occurred to you?" She paused, her lips trembling. There was no reply.

"You haven't suspected anything? Not even when I kissed you so many times last night?" Again he shook his head.

"Well, I've a surprise!" And she fumbled beneath the cloth; then, her face radiant, shot out:

"You're going to play the big game! You're going into business for yourself and—"

She leaned forward. With a swift movement of both hands from beneath the table, she spilled upon his empty plate a shower of crisp, crackling, yellow thousand-dollar bills and exclaimed:

"And there's the capital, my love!"

CHAPTER III

BUTLER PIERCE'S PROMISE

JANET's mind moved in pictures. Her imagination made her thoughts a kind of endless film, and before she had met Butler for luncheon her eager fancy had depicted completely the scene as she would have it. Butler was to have a moment of staggered bewilderment; then he was to recover himself and exclaim, "Why, Janet!" and pause for only a second before he breathed, "You darling!" at which his hand was to seek hers across the table or, perhaps, his foot press her foot beneath. At all events he was to be immediately fired by the great idea and to show, in the warmest way, his love and gratitude, his quick acceptance of their challenge to the world.

But Butler did not. Instead, after she had hurled the shower of crisp new bills upon his plate, he blinked ingloriously once or twice, looked at her stupefied, started to say something, did not say it, and observed: "Umph!"

"Was it too sudden, dearest?" she asked, bending upon him tender and solicitous eyes. He did not reply, but slowly and methodically gathered up the bills and thumbed them over, one by one, his lips moving as he made the count.

"So you got it all?" was his only comment.

"Why, of course, you silly love," she rejoined spiritedly, and watched him. There was a pause while Butler soberly folded the money into his wallet. She continued leaning eagerly forward until he dropped his chin into his palm and began staring blankly at his plate. At that, with a short laugh, she fell back in the chair. The waiter, with the melons, jogged Butler's elbow. He shook himself and sat straight.

"As soon as we leave here we'd better go around to the bank," he remarked, and, observing the curious and amused glances coming at them from nearby tables, went on:

"Don't let's talk now. Wait till we're out of here."

Therefore, during the rest of the meal Janet did nothing more than muster, once or twice, a tremulous smile for him, while he, for the most part, kept silent.

It was not until they had deposited the money and were walking slowly together toward the railroad station that he gave signs of shaking off his apathy.

"Where in the world did you get this idea?" he asked, with an odd, twisted smile.

"Oh yes," exclaimed Janet, "I forgot. Why, from Julian, and I promised to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"That Julian's done the same thing—gone into business for himself. Isn't it wonderful—both of you launched for yourselves—playing the big game?"

"What can you be talking about?" he queried.

"Has he quit his job?"

"No, no," protested Janet, "but he's been made, I think, a partner—yes, that's it, made a partner—and he told me about it last night. All of a sudden it came over me how nice it would be—how wonderful—for you to become partner or start a firm or something. Now you understand, my love, don't you?" She looked up at him hopefully.

"So it was from Julian, eh?" mused Butler, watching his leisurely feet. They passed out of the side street and turned up into the quiet of Park Avenue. Janet kept regarding him sidewise. Once, glancing at his face, she saw that same pinched-up, distressed expression around his eyes which she had detected the evening before when he had leaned across the lighted pit of Julian's car. Janet was puzzled and crestfallen.

At the station entrance he kissed her. "Bye, dear," he said, his large, big-knuckled hand still on her shoulder. "We'll have a talk tonight. This'll take a heap of thinking!"

"A heap of thinking? What will?" she cried a little fearsomely.

"My new occupation," he laughed, and with a final caress on her arm, added: "The occupation, my love, of being the husband of a charming and altogether adorable brainstorm."

With that he left her. Lingered outside the doors of the station, she watched him dodge nimbly between two taxi-cabs and across the crowded street and swing with easy grace to the rear of a passing car. Before he disappeared inside he waved to her. There was a

forlorn smile struggling at her lips as she waved back to him, and turning joined in the in-going throng.

A vague, undefined greyness was hovering over her spirits as she moved over the broad spaces of the depot. Of course, she could understand Butler's reserve and apathy; the project had been sprung upon him with bewildering suddenness. But wouldn't it have been nice, she told herself, if he could have recovered in time to exult, to jubilate with her? Never mind, that would come; and then, as she dropped into a seat in the half-empty local, with its mid-day drowsiness, it occurred to her that the one sure, pleasant afternoon for her, the one certain method of recreating the high, ecstatic mood of the morning, was to go up the Tuckerton hill and delight her sister, Martha Tremont, and her brother-in-law, John, with the great news.

It was shortly after three o'clock when Janet appeared before the grey esplanade of Ardenwold. She had telephoned from the Tuckerton station to her sister, and Mrs. Tremont had sent down a motor to fetch her. As the car drew alongside the wide steps Janet was leaning far out, a foot on the running board, a hand on the unlatched door. She bounded to the bricks of the porch. Martha was in the depths of a wicker chair, sheltered by a huge red and white striped awning which ran the width of the house. She allowed a book that had been propped in her lap to fall, face down, upon the sash of her blue, airy tea-gown, and slightly raising one bare arm, worked her long, expressive fingers open and shut in a welcome that involved not the least effort.

"Where's John?" asked Janet, as she delivered a vigorous kiss on Martha's upturned cheek.

"In his study," answered Martha, smiling quizzically. "What's up?"

"Oh, I've wonderful news. Wait till I get John." Janet bolted indoors and discovered her brother-in-law at his desk, standing. He was very precise for the last day of August in a vest and bat-wing collar. Before him was a large map, upon which he was making small red marks, and pulling, meanwhile, slowly and meditatively, on his heavy black moustache.

"Ah, my dear Janet," he said, glancing up, but not otherwise interrupting his work, "I'm glad to see you. You can help me. I'm indicating with as much exactitude as possible the planting I'll do next year on the place. You see, I have put here—"

"John, I'd love to help you on that some other time. I can't now. I've something to tell you and Martha first. Come outside now, please—I can't wait."

"Indeed?" observed Tremont, lifting his brows. He carefully laid down his pencil and with a last look at the map, followed Janet. She reached the esplanade well ahead of him.

"Oh, Martha," she declared to her sister as she swung a chair around, "it's the most splendid thing that ever happened!" And then, over her shoulder, "Hurry, John!" Tremont made his heavy-heeled, deliberate approach, his hands grasping the lapels of his coat—a solid, girthy figure of a man. Martha's cool, lazy eyes rested on Janet's face.

"Dear me, Janey," she smiled, "you have, indeed, another excitement, haven't you? It occurred to me only the other day that it had been a long time since you were on a rampage. But you're off again. I see all the signs."

"I'm much interested," said John, sitting down. "Let us have your story, my dear, and without delay."

"Well," began Janet, "here it is." She paused and then flung forth, her face alight: "Butler's going into business for himself." Her glance jumped from one countenance to the other. Martha's critical, detached smile never changed. Tremont nodded gravely and twirled his watch-chain.

"Leaving the safe shelter of Pyncheon & Styce, eh?" was John's first comment.

"Leaving it for the larger things—for the big things of people who are worth while," declared the girl.

"And may I ask just who those distinguished individuals, the people who are worth while, may happen to be?" questioned Martha ironically.

"Employers—the men who play the big game," supplied Janet.

"Oh!" observed Martha, with a half smile on her thin lips. Tremont was looking off into the distance. There was faint dismay in Janet's eyes.

"I dare say that in branching out in this way Butler will continue to engage in the paper business?" commented John.

"He hasn't told me yet," replied the girl, entirely serious, and then she went on eagerly, hurriedly, a little

breathlessly: "But isn't it wonderful? Isn't it splendid that Butler has jumped right out of the hired-man class? All sorts of opportunities for work are opening for us—opportunities for work and usefulness and fun—opportunities for doing things. That's what they used to say about Butler in college—that he did things. It's interesting, isn't it, to see that same quality coming out now that he's in this big New York game?" There was something almost solemn in her intensity, in the burning of her desire to fire their enthusiasm. "Isn't it wonderful?" she repeated.

"Certainly it is," caught up Martha promptly. "Anything you do, Janey, is wonderful, and I wish you luck. John does, too! Don't you, John?"

"Why, certainly—certainly!" rejoined Tremont in a tone a little too matter-of-fact to be completely satisfying to Janet. He paused and added: "There are two or three points I am wondering about!"

"Yes?" came from the girl.

"How about capital?" he asked ponderously. "Has ample capital been secured?"

"Oh yes," replied Janet quickly, with a confident shake of her head, and her clear, youthful face lighted with amusement. "All that's been attended to," she laughed.

"And who, may I ask, is the backer of the new enterprise?"

"I can't tell you that," she flung out gaily.

"Not tell us, Janey?" put in Martha.

"No," asserted the girl.

"I can see no reason for secrecy," observed John, "if matters have been fully and satisfactorily arranged."

"Oh, matters are arranged, properly enough!" returned Janet. "But—but—well—I don't think I'd better tell about the money."

"Why not?" pursued Martha, laughing a little.

"Why not?" repeated Janet. "Well, I'm not sure Butler would want me to tell."

"Rare discretion!" commented John, getting to his feet. "Rare discretion! But I must return to my work." He bowed low to Janet. "I wish you all success," he said stiffly. Janet looked up at him, now thoroughly dismayed.

"Oh, John means it," put in Martha quickly, "and so do I, dear." Through the open windows came the ringing of the telephone.

"Please present my congratulations to Butler," said Tremont, and backed two or three steps. "Excuse me," he added and, turning, went down the esplanade to the doorway. Janet's eyes followed him.

"John is funny, isn't he?" she said a little dolefully. "As dear and loving a man as ever lived; but he simply cannot get excited, can he?"

"I've never known him to," grinned her sister.

"You know, Martha," Janet said, attempting to conceal her chagrin, "some. I rather thought that today I might shock him into almost throwing his hat in the air."

"You poor foolish child. John do that! Never! It

would kill him," returned the other. "But never mind! Come here and kiss me."

This was such a totally unwonted, unlooked-for manifestation from her older sister that Janet fairly leaped to the side of her chair. "You're the most lovely and beautiful sister in the world," she cried, flinging her arms about her neck.

"Well, don't choke me to death, if I am," rejoined Martha, disengaging herself with a shamefaced smile. Janet was just dropping back to her seat when John suddenly came out of the house and was advancing briskly toward them.

"Ah, my dear Janet, I have the story—I have the story," he was saying, wagging a big finger, excitement in his tone. Martha's smile widened. Janet raised her eyes in innocent alarm. "It's most serious—most serious," he went on. "I've just had a message by telephone from Winter. Most serious!" Standing above the girl, he was jiggling his watch-chain with nervous rapidity. "It's most serious—most serious, indeed."

"Well, so you've said," chided Martha. "Now tell us what it is."

"Winter informs me," he replied, turning toward his wife, "that your sister appeared this morning in his office and without explaining the purposes for which she wished to use the money, demanded every cent of her legacy, not only at once but—but in cash!" He almost shrilled the last words.

"La-la!" cried Martha and fell back in her chair, laughing.

"We must inquire into the matter most carefully—most carefully, indeed," affirmed Tremont.

"I don't see why!" blazed Janet, suddenly erect.

"You don't, dearie?" contributed Martha gaily.

"Well, I'll tell you. If it were some one else's money nobody would care. But funds that are lodged in the family—Oh no, dearie! That's the trouble, Janey, love. You've never got the money point of view. Now, John, sit! Take this calmly! Janet, don't get angry—just explain."

"I have explained," cried the girl, her lips quivering. "Explained fully. Butler's going into business for himself—that's all, that's enough."

"Quite so!" caught up Tremont. "But we must know more. What reason, for example, have you and Butler to suppose that the capital provided by your father's legacy will prove sufficient? Have estimates been prepared?"

"Estimates?" echoed Janet. "If there ought to be estimates Butler will get them."

"I should regard that as a highly important point. The fund was not large," he said incisively. There was a distinct pause before he resumed. "And has Butler determined upon the grades of paper in which he will specialise?" A bewildered frown was on Janet's face.

"The kinds he can sell," put in Martha, with a little giggle.

"Yes, that's it," nodded Janet.

"No doubt," observed Tremont, glancing at his

wife. "And I presume you do not know, Janet, what pledges of support he may have been able to secure from the trade, do you?"

"Pledges of support! How in the world could he get pledges of support, whatever they are?" cried the girl. "We thought of the plan—the idea came—only last night."

"Last night!" exclaimed Tremont. His voice rose to the highest pitch of incredulity.

"Now, John!" cautioned Martha. He shook his head despairingly, and then, more quietly, asked: "Don't you regard this move as somewhat precipitate, Janet?"

"Not necessarily," returned the girl; "some things we know instantly are the right things to do. This was one of them."

"Ah, I see," observed Tremont sardonically. "And acting upon that opinion you decided to hazard your legacy in pursuance of the plan."

"There's no hazard about it," flung back Janet. This questioning attitude was like a file on the girl's nerves. Moreover, there was a rising lump in her throat. She had come for warm handclasps, congratulations, good wishes, and found herself on a grill.

"No—there's no hazard about it," she cried, springing to her feet, her hands clenched, "and even if there was, I wouldn't care. It's all well enough, John, for you to be critical—to think I'm foolish—to think Butler's foolish. It's easy enough to say, don't do this, and don't do that, when you've got everything

in the world. Wait until we have made money! Maybe we'll be conservatives, too! But if you think we're going to live our lives out in mediocrity in Meadowhedge you're wrong; and if you think that with all your questionings, all your prying around into tiresome details—estimates, pledges of support—how in the world should I know of such matters?—if you think that in that way you are going to frighten us away from the big things, you're wrong." She paused, her lips a set line. "Wrong, I say!" she declared again, and this time with a stamp of her foot.

"Good girl, Janey," sang out Martha. "And now, John, where's your enthusiasm? Produce it."

Tremont smiled grimly for a moment. "There is one more question, Janet," he said at length, and with his heavy solemnity, "which I should like to ask if you would permit me."

"Yes," came from Janet.

"Why the cash?" he asked quizzically.

"Why the cash?" cut in Martha, her fine, clear eyes half closed with amusement. "Oh John, John, will you never learn? Don't you see that's Janet—Janet through and through? All the rest of the world would have taken a check—an unromantic, prosaic check. But not Janey! Nice, crinkly bills to gloat over—that's what she wanted. That's Janet!"

The girl's hand went to Martha's affectionately.

"Yes, that's it—something like that, anyway," Janet said, "and I hurried here as soon as I'd given the money to Butler only because I thought how glad

you'd be, and how pleased! Don't hunt around for any more pin-points of trouble, John. Just think of the great, fine, outstanding fact that Butler is going into business on his own account—is going to be a big man; just think of that and tell me how delighted you are."

"Yes, John, just think of that," exhorted Martha, smiling, "of that and nothing else. Do you understand?"

"Very well, my dear," sighed John, standing up, "and I'm sure Janet fully appreciates how close to our hearts her welfare is." He spoke in a manner of stiff precision.

"Oh, I do, John!" beamed the girl, mollified. "You're the two dearest things in the world. Thank you—thank you both."

"Once more," continued Tremaine, "all success!" He held out his hand; Janet took it warmly.

"I knew everything would be all right now I explained," she said.

"Of course," he returned, and deposited an uncompromisingly dignified down the esplanade. Martha turned her indolent, appraising eyes to Janet and for a long moment they rested on the girl's face.

"This is all well and good, Janey," she began at length, "but where in the world did you get this idea? What started you off?"

"It was Julian," she replied. "He told me he'd been made a member of the firm he works for and then naturally enough—"

"It occurred to you," caught up Martha, "if Julian, why not your dear, beloved Butler?"

"Exactly," coincided Janet, sparkling. "Ever since their college days they've always gone ahead step by step."

"Well, I hope Butler is going to be a little more fastidious in picking his steps than your illustrious friend," said Martha casually.

"Why, Martha!" exclaimed the girl, wide-eyed, "what do you mean?"

"Just what I said," was the unconcerned reply. "A little more fastidious in picking his steps."

"But Julian's our dearest friend—our closest, finest friend—mine as well as Butler's."

"Yours?" joked Martha. "Married women—especially young, good-looking ones—do not find their friends among the check-suit, bachelor brigade, my dear!"

"Oh, Martha, you're absurd!"

"Oh, well, maybe," agreed the other indifferently. "But let's forget all that, and tell me about that terrible infant of yours."

When Janet reached Meadowhedge at five-thirty o'clock she had been restored to high spirits. Before she had left Ardenwold, John had emerged from his library carrying his map, carefully pinned on a drawing-board. They had prevailed upon Martha to come out across the wide, smooth-cropped lawn, to the wall which commanded a view of the rolling acres and wood-clusters of the Tremont estate. He had shown them

where rows of birches or poplars would be set. Martha had followed his pointing arm with her steady, intellectual eyes, luminous in the slanting afternoon sun. The motor to take Janet home had rounded the driveway while they were still grouped together about the large flat board in her brother-in-law's hands. She had left them there; and as the car moved off her last picture was of Martha, stately, almost tall, in her flowing tea-gown; John, strong-backed, thick-necked, earnest, turning inquiringly to her. Beside them was the gray wall of the house; before them the green stretches of the country-side. Life was beautiful thought Janet; both Martha and she had found so much of happiness for which to live.

When Janet arrived home that afternoon she was impatient for her husband's return. As she alighted by the cottage steps she twisted her wrist for a look at her watch and saw that it was an hour before the train which Butler usually took was due. Flinging open the screen door, and tossing her hat onto the settee, she was wondering how she could possibly fill in the time and was immoderately surprised, upon entering the living-room, to find her husband stretched at full length upon the couch, reflectively smoking a cigarette. She stopped short in the doorway.

"What's the matter, dear?" she cried in momentary alarm.

"Nothing's the matter," returned Butler, a trifle wearily, and held out a hand as a signal to come over to him. "I came home early to see you—to talk to you. Where've you been?"

"Up to see Martha and John," she declared, dropping on the edge of the couch beside him. "To tell them the great news."

"For goodness' sake, Janet!" her husband exclaimed, and swung sharply to a sitting position. He looked at her, stupefied. "What under heavens did you do that for?"

"And why not?" demanded Janet, standing.

"Why not? Because you've made yourself ridiculous—made me ridiculous."

"Not at all," retorted the girl, colour rushing to her cheeks. "I did no such thing. They wished us success; they were very nice; it was right and proper to tell them. There was nothing ridiculous about it."

"No, but there will be," declared Butler bitingly. "Something extremely ridiculous, because—" He hesitated, leaned forward to toss his cigarette in the fireplace, and concluded, "because I'm not going into business for myself—I'm not going to take the money."

The girl's lips parted and her eyes opened wide. She stood transfixed, gazing blankly down at her husband. His head on the back of the couch, he looked steadily up to her and nodded solemnly once or twice before he added:

"That's a fact, Janet. I mean it!"

"Mean it!" she echoed. "You can't!"

"I do," he affirmed, and reaching for her hand, drew her down beside him. His arm circled her shoulders.

"Don't think I'm not grateful," he said, holding her tight. "Don't think I'm not appreciative of what you've done—of what you've wanted to do. No one could feel more gratitude than—"

"Gratitude!" cried Janet, breaking from him and springing to her feet. "Gratitude!"

"It was as much for me as it was for you. Don't talk of gratitude. Anyway, it's a step you'd have taken soon. All worth-while men do. I merely wanted to hurry it along—to help you a little sooner over that first small hump in your career. Butler, you must do it—you must do it now—you can't back out."

"Why not?" he asked, spreading his hands. "Why be so strenuous? We're terribly happy. We've everything we really want. We're going on splendidly. Let's leave things alone, and maybe at the end of the year I can get a raise of two or three hundred dollars."

"Two or three hundred dollars!" caught up the girl. "What's two or three hundred dollars? We must have thousands. We must have a broad, full life, a life of achievement, a life that escapes Meadowhedge and all that Meadowhedge means. You must be a big man, a figure, a personage, somebody that counts. I've only come to see all this since yesterday—to see what money may mean. Two or three hundred dollars! Oh, never! Never!" She moved restlessly in despair.

"What's struck you, Janet? Do you expect all this of me?"

"I expect everything of you!" she cried, drawing herself straight.

Butler shook his head gravely. "I'm not sure, Janet, you've a right to do this." He had the solemnity of a mature boy.

"It is not I that does it," she cried in return. "It's our world. We're born to the class that achieves—we're born to the class that has automobiles, houses, servants. We can't be failures. We can't be nobodies. We must live as our world lives; and, as Julian said, you can never do it from the hired-man class."

He winced, and his arm dropped over his eyes. "Then you're not happy now," he finally said quietly, questioningly, and a little resentfully.

"Oh, Butler, you know—you understand!" she declared, sitting beside him. "Happy? I don't have to tell you that."

"Then why do this thing?"

"Because it's our duty—because we must make our happiness richer, finer, deeper."

"But perhaps I can't do it!"

"That's absurd," she replied. "You've kept succeeding ever since you were a small boy. In college—everywhere. Why, father would never have started you off in Pyncheon & Styce if he had not known just how able you are. Every one realises the same thing."

Butler grinned, and getting up, began pacing the floor, his hands in his coat pockets. Janet followed him with anxious eyes.

"Of course, all this is well enough," he finally began.

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"It's all right, dearest," he whispered. "I'll do it. I'll make
this try. I'll go after everything in the world for you "

"I would like all those big things, too, though I'm getting on now perfectly well without them. And it's very fine to picture this broader life, and to feel that you and others have confidence in me; but—well, just suppose I lost that money. Suppose—"

"But you won't!" insisted the girl, with a small frown.

"Business is always a risk."

"Not with a man like you." Again there was a pause. But he resumed the couch and was slowly snapping his knife half closed and open when he went on.

"But just suppose I should lose it. Your mother, your sister, John—none of them would ever forgive me—never! And they'll all say, they're sure to say, I wheedled you into giving it to me."

"What difference in the world does it make what they say?" cried the girl impatiently. "We're above what people say!"

"But we're not. No one is."

"But we are!" Janet reiterated. "And, anyway, if we're not—just think what they'll say otherwise—what they'll say if we don't do this thing." She paused and looked at him fixedly, her lips compressed.

"Well, what will they say?" he questioned, with half a smile.

"I should think you could imagine!" she said. He shook his head and she hesitated before asking abruptly, pleadingly:

"You'll do it, Butler, won't you? You'll take the money, dearest?"

"I don't think I'd better," he replied. "But tell me—what will be said if I don't take it?"

Janet got to her feet. She walked slowly toward the table and was behind Butler when she spoke.

"Well, one thing that people will say is this: They'll say that Julian Powell is going ahead fast, getting to be a big man, and that you are simply standing dead still."

There was a heavy silence in the room. The little French clock ticked cheerfully. Janet stood motionless by the table, her small jaw firm, her eyes resting on the top of Butler's head. She could not see his face, but she knew that if she could there would be that pinched expression there which in the last twenty-four hours she had come to know. Her husband neither moved nor spoke. The silence grew more tense. The girl found herself breathing thickly, rapidly. The thrust had been more telling than she had planned. A burst of feeling, of compassion, suddenly assailed her.

"Oh, Butler," she cried out, "that was cruel! That was unfair. Forgive me! Forgive me!"

In a flash she crossed around to him and dropped to her knees. Her hands sought his and she buried her head in his lap.

"I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it," she sobbed. "I only said it because—because, oh, darling, because I want things so. I want them so terribly."

A little time passed before she felt him bend forward and kiss her upon her hair. For a moment he fondled

her hand. Finally, gripping her arms, he drew her up close to him.

"It's all right, dearest," he whispered. "I'll do it. I'll make this try. I'll go after everything in the world for you."

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCING OSCAR HARSEN

Mrs. FIELDING, Janet's mother, was a plump, docile person with tired eyes who spent most of her days in a rocking-chair between the window and the fireplace of her city apartment. She was easily agitated—agitated by even the smallest occurrences. Whenever the telephone rang she crossed the room to the desk where the instrument stood with tremulous haste, and it was Janet's experience that her mother was generally out of breath when she tried to speak.

"Yes, my dear, it is fine," was all that Janet got back over the wire when she imparted news of the great venture.

"Oh, it's more than that. Say it's more than that. Say it's the finest thing that ever happened!" exhorted the girl.

"It's the finest thing that ever happened," meekly repeated Mrs. Fielding.

Somehow, Janet managed to be satisfied. At all events, she told herself, it was preferable to the manner in which Charles Winter had expressed himself. He had sent her a note which read:

"I have comforted myself with the reflection that the rewards of life come only to those who dare; but

you and Butler are embarking on pretty high seas and your craft is small. If I can be of help let me know, and it is unnecessary to add that both of you have the best wishes of Charles Winter."

"He had to find something to be gloomy about," had commented Janet as she tossed the page of clear, fine chirography upon the table.

Of all the responses to the news Julian Powell's was easily the most gratifying. In order to make the announcement she induced him to motor out for dinner. He came refreshingly cool, half amused and bland. At her words he leaped from his chair, slapped Butler on the back and wrung his hand. Janet beamed and recounted the history of the idea.

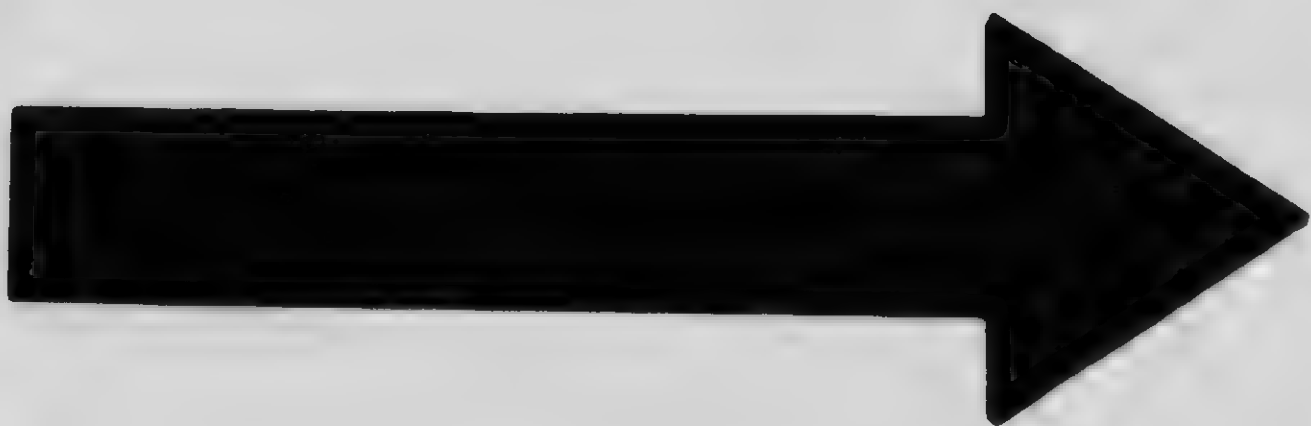
"Who said you and I weren't a winning team? Didn't I say we could help each other along?" Julian exclaimed, and declared that in celebration of the event he must give a party in town the very next evening.

He did; and Mrs. Reynolds was there, alluring in a blue taffeta gown, gathered girdle-wise, sensuously, to the shoulders. Before the midnight local had left for Tuckerton they danced, and Janet saw the admiring eyes, from the small, white-topped tables along the edge of the floor, following Butler's and Mrs. Reynolds' twinkling feet.

"Nice woman—Lotta Reynolds," commented Butler, going out in the train. He pushed the seat in front of them over and stretched out his feet.

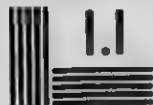
"You could get a lesson from her."

"What's that, my dear?"



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"Not to take things so seriously—so desperately." He chuckled at Janet's chin; she smiled absently and gazed out of the window. Her mind was already engrossed in another direction. There must be something, she felt, to signalise the happy turn in their affairs, exactly as Julian's much-desired motor had signalised the turn in his, and she was reasoning that if Butler's step ahead did not find tangible expression in some worth-while form, it actually was no step at all. Without saying anything to Butler, she pondered this problem all the way out; the next forenoon she settled upon what she wanted.

She was administering to her child its morning rub, and the boy was squirming upon her lap under a dash of alcohol along its spine. The servant entered and tossed three letters upon the bed. One of them caught Janet's eye. It was from the agent for the Meadowhedge cottage, asking, no doubt, that Butler sign and return the lease for the ensuing year, which had been sent to him the week before, and which, during the events of the past days, had remained neglected, stuffed into a pigeonhole of the desk in the living-room downstairs. The instant that the letter caught her eye, Janet's mind was made up. They would leave Meadowhedge, its drab pretentiousness, its mediocrity.

This was in the forenoon. By afternoon she had the new home picked out. It was the trim little house with the gargoye knocker which stood upon the very crest of the Tuckerton hill. Upon an occasion Janet had been through the house, and long had felt that no more

charming place could be found in which to entertain one's friends than its long, low-ceilinged room, with its small-paned windows on three sides, which one entered directly from the front door; that there was no more wholesome or better spot in which to rear their boy than the bit of lawn beside the brick wall which was so entrancingly tangled over with ivy and rose vines. Promptly, in her imagination, she began distributing mahogany pieces about the room and hanging dark chintzes at the windows. By the time when she set out that evening to meet Butler's train she had got even to the point of erecting, in vision, a sundial at the side of the house.

Butler demurred. "It's more rent," he said, "and it's a fixed charge on us."

"Very little more," rejoined Janet.

"Yes, but more, just the same," he argued. "Why not, if you are going to do anything at all, get a nurse for the boy?"

"No," came from her emphatically. "Maybe we can get a nurse later, but the first thing for us must be a home."

It was Sunday and shortly before one o'clock. The renewal lease was still in the pigeonhole of the desk downstairs and Janet's eyes were jumping with zestful interest. Butler had visited the agent for the house on the hill and found the rent not as much as they had

supposed. Janet had dragged him to the low stone wall to view the rounded doorway and the overhanging eaves, and she was convinced that now he was as eager for the move as she was.

"Wait till Sunday," he had said. "Matters will be definite then. It's all a question of the salary. If everything goes through, we'll move."

Although Janet, following a tradition that her father had brought down from upper New York State and implanted in her, frowned upon Sabbath-day business, she had no scruples now. Greater than her regard for that tradition was her inborn desire to see things accomplished, and now she was humming to herself with delight because Butler had arranged that Oscar Harsen should come out to settle the final terms of their partnership that afternoon.

Janet had not been surprised that Butler had sought a partner. Her father, from the time she had first had a seat at the dinner table, had talked of his partners; Julian had spoken of becoming a partner. So much a matter of course, in any business enterprise, did a partner seem that when Butler had explained that it was safer not to shoulder the burdens of the new undertaking single-handed, she had not paused to question. Her entire surprise had been that the man her husband had selected should have been Harsen.

She had never seen him. He belonged to that army of beings that peopled her husband's other world—"Jim Flint, who bought for the Eureka"; "Harry Knowles, who was out for the Triple State"; "Old

Gregory, our cashier." These individuals she variously pictured as short and fat, with creased trousers or baggy knees, with moustaches or not; and her only interest in them was as figures in Butler's dinner-table talk. Only in this way, too, she had ever heard of "Harsen, our assistant manufacturing man," and for no definite reason he had taken form in Janet's mind as a bent gentleman of forty who looked at Butler over the top of his nose glasses and always held a large piece of ruled paper in his hand.

"Why did you get him?" she cried in amazement.

"Because he is about as able a young fellow as I know," rejoined Butler, a little haughtily.

"Young?" exclaimed Janet.

Butler went on to explain that Harsen was thirty-two, unmarried, clean shaven, and did wear glasses; that he had performed the spectacular task of reducing by one-thirtieth of one cent the cost of producing "133-lb. super-calend. . ."; and that he never had a piece of paper in his hand, or on his desk, for more than fifteen minutes in the mornings. Janet had a pronounced reaction.

"Why, we can make a great friend of him, can't we?" she rejoiced. "That's splendid! You and he will be working together all day; you'll have everything in common. You'll bring him home often, too—especially since he's not married. I hope he'll like me. Your partner must be my friend, too. Oh, Butler, isn't everything working out wonderfully?"

It was that conception of the new and close relation-

ship for both of them that the new business would develop which had sent Janet so vigorously up and down stairs that Sunday morning and caused her to brush aside her maid's repeated assurances that the mushrooms would not be underdone nor the chicken overdone and prompted her to open and reopen the range door for herself. She wanted to be sure of her welcome for their new friend.

At one o'clock Butler returned from the station. Janet was picking a handkerchief from her dressing-table drawer when the screen door banged and his voice reached her from below.

"First of all," he was saying, "I want you to meet my wife."

She did not hear Harsen's reply; he had evidently gone into the living-room. With a last look in the glass at her cheeks, now a very presentable pink, and a warmth within her at Butler's words, she tripped downstairs.

Immediately she felt that there were some aspects of Mr. Oscar Harsen for which Butler had not prepared her. Janet took in the gray gloves protruding from the upper pocket of his coat and the gold watch-chain looped across the top of his vest. But she liked his mouth, which stood prominently forward, and there was a good-humoured expression about his eyes. His extremely large, strong-fingered hands seemed to her to testify to force of some kind.

"Very pleased to meet you," were his first words, and as Butler brought up the rear to the dining-room

directly across the hall, and squeezed behind Harsen's chair to his own, she found her mind unexpectedly busy, searching for items of talk.

"You've never visited Meadowhedge before?" she finally began.

"No," said Harsen. "I don't suppose I get to the country more than once a year. I'm a city fellow and the country's not in my beat."

"Mr. Harsen lives in Brooklyn," put in Butler, "and attends very closely to business."

"I have to," Janet's guest went on, "and I don't believe I'm happy unless I do. Been doing it for quite a number of years now. You see, my case, Mrs. Pierce, is different from your husband's here. I had to begin to scratch for myself pretty young."

"How young, Mr. Harsen?" asked Janet with polite interest.

"Oh, let me see, now," gravely replied Harsen, putting back his head and looking at the top of the wall. "I think I was about fourteen when I began carrying parcels and filling ink-wells for Pyncheon & Styce—and your pa. Fine man, your pa, Mrs. Pierce," he added, inclining his head slightly toward her.

Janet hastened on:

"So you never had a chance for much schooling, did you? Not even a business course, I suppose?"

"Well, I don't know," he laughed, glancing knowingly at her. "I'd call P. & S. about as good a business course as I'd want to take. How about that, Pierce?" He turned with a large-toothed grin toward

Butler, who did not lift his eyes from his plate as he replied:

"Great training-school."

"But surely you have other interests, Mr. Harsen—recreations of some kind?" asked Janet, with a side-long glance at her husband to see if she were proceeding as he wished.

"Well, I suppose you might call them that," the prospective partner replied dubiously. "Once a week, every Friday, I go to Leuton and see the stars."

"Most of the good vaudeville performers go there, I believe," contributed Butler.

"Indeed they do. Why, in one week last spring we had the Dandelion Twins, that show 'Kiss as Kiss Can,' and the monkey that talks—you know its name! Cleverest little thing you ever saw! Something begins with P. Oh, you know as well as I do."

But neither Butler nor Janet could help Harsen out, and after a minute of pained searching of the ceiling, he gave it up.

"There are so many of those vaudeville things," consoled Janet, "one can never remember the names."

"Why, I supposed," he rejoined with surprise, "that you and your husband knew every one of those acts that came to town."

"Very few, I'm afraid. Once in a great while we go."

When Janet pushed back her chair she felt that her guest had suffered more from his own self-consciousness than any one else. She had seen the perpetual shifting

of his knife and fork on his plate; how he had arranged them carefully at right angles, then moved them together, then set them farther apart. In each pause in the talk he had sipped at his ice water. There had been a guttural note in his voice, especially at the end of sentences, which Janet knew was not real. She was wondering if he would ever learn to be sufficiently himself to make possible the ideal of the friendship she had conceived, when Butler, with an apology, left her in the living-room and, leading Harsen again to the dining-room, drew together the folding doors.

Janet dragged a small rocking-chair close to a window. Her thoughts had left Harsen and travelled to the house on the hill when, perfectly distinctly, so that she could catch each inflection and tone, came Butler's voice through the wide crevice between the doors. She rested her elbow on the sill and putting her chin in the palm of her hand, looked out. There was no breeze. The stucco houses of Meadowhedge threw off a hot glare. A stray motor, its driver slouched listlessly at the wheel, rushed along the roadway above. In the neighbouring cottages dark-coloured blinds were drawn; chairs and cushions lay deserted on the front porches. It was an hour of heaviness and sleep. But Janet was alert.

"There's not a great deal to go over, is there?" Butler had said deferentially.

"I should say there was a great deal," came from Harsen. "There's that check-signing matter, for one thing, not to mention a couple of mere details such as

how we're going to whack up the stock and what salaries we're going to draw!"

Janet realized instantly that the man who had been at her table was not the man with her husband now. All the guttural quality was gone from Harsen's voice. He spoke with assurance. In his own way, he seemed now as surefooted as Julian Powell. The transformation, and particularly the suddenness of it, amazed Janet. She liked him infinitely better and her hopes of friendship began to revive. She leaned back in her chair and rocked gently.

"Well, then, what will we take up first?" she heard Butler acquiesce in mild tones.

"Leave that to you," replied the other, and Janet could tell that there was a cigar tight in his teeth and that, preparatory to settling down to the business of the afternoon, he was lighting it.

"I hadn't understood that there was any question about how checks were to be signed," her husband said moderately, and Janet wondered why they had not gone directly to the more important matter of salaries.

"Well, there is no question," Harsen declared. "It has to be done just one way—my name's got to go with bank just as much as yours. You're going to be out all day selling the stuff, and I'm going to be around the shop. We can't hang up everything till you get ready to come in. That's one reason. Another is that I don't intend to be in the position of your office-boy with the bank or any one else. Either name goes on checks. That's flat!"

Only in the vaguest way did Janet comprehend the argument, and she gave no thought to it. She was too greatly perplexed by Harsen's sudden tone. Not only was it acrimonious; it was ill-mannered, harsh, peremptory, and positively rasping in contrast to Butler's conciliatory and kindly manner.

"As for placing you in the position of an office-boy," her husband was resuming, "isn't that a bit ridiculous, old man? Really, now? And, besides, you know I'd be the last one who would want to do that. You speak of impeding the work. I should imagine I'll be there enough to sign checks. Every morning I'll be in to open mail; I'll be stopping in regularly again before luncheon and once more along about five in the afternoon. Isn't that enough?"

"Too much, if you are going to sell any paper. But for the present let's pass that point by."

Janet warmed to Butler's manner, but why did they not finish up a question once they had taken it up? It puzzled her that Harsen, after so much ill-natured argument, should so casually glide away from the issue. There was a long pause and she was sure that the topic overwhelmingly important to her was next to be put on the table before them. She ceased rocking and rested her head on the back of the chair.

It was Harsen who spoke. To her distress it was not the problem of salaries that he raised; it was the less vital matter of how the stock of the new concern should be divided. She was impatient and only mildly interested when the prospective partner began:

"I don't think this division you've provided for is fair."

From his tone Harsen was evidently speaking from a document in his hand. "I've got to have more than twenty-five per cent. of the stock if I'm going to throw up my present job," he went on decisively.

"I'd be delighted to have you have more—if you'll put up part of the capital."

"Now, look here, Pierce! There's no use going into that again. I'm contributing brains and experience—that's all. I haven't got any money myself—not a sou—and there's no one I can borrow from. I'm not like you, shaking hands with a million dollars every time you meet a relative. One reason I'm in this deal is that you've got in your connections a great line of reserve credit."

"Which will never do either of us or the firm a bit of good," came firmly from Butler.

"Oh, I guess they're going to see you through," declared Harsen, laughing knowingly.

"Now, listen, Harsen! Put those ideas out of your head. It's only the Pierce money that is going into this firm, and nothing more."

"Oh, well, just as you say—just as you say," the visitor laughed. "But that doesn't alter the fact that, considering the ability and standing I'm contributing, I'm entitled to at least forty per cent. of that stock."

During the encounter Janet sat upright. She was proud of her husband's part; it was like him. But she

was positive now that she did not want Harsen for a friend. At the very suggestion of his words, she had gripped in indignation the arms of her chair till her fingernails were white.

"Forty per cent.?" echoed Butler amiably. "That's a lot!"

"Sorry you think so."

The fear crossed Janet's mind, and she rocked nervously, that they might not agree on anything and that before she and Butler could act the house on the hill would have been leased, probably for a long term of years, to some one else. But her resentment at Harsen and her anxiety were lost in complete bewilderment, almost disgust, when she heard them pass by that point, also without settlement. To her the proceeding so far had been thorough'y unsystematic.

"Well, next comes salaries." At Harsen's words she relaxed and waited.

"Yes?" queried Butler expectantly.

"You've got yours away up too high. Why, that represents twenty-five per cent. advance for you over what you're drawing from P. & S."

"How do you know?"

"I make a point of knowing things. And you got me slated for a thousand below your own figure. That doesn't go."

"I'm President of the concern."

"Well, I'm Vice-President and Treasurer."

"I'm married; you're not."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"My necessities are greater than yours," pleaded Butler.

"Cut 'em down," retorted Harsen.

Janet's impulse was to rush to the folding-doors, throw them open, and express what was in her mind. Tears alternately of disappointment and of rage threatened her eyes. Across the hall there was a heavy silence. Once again she rested her elbow on the window-sill and this time she gazed out despondently.

"We don't seem to be getting very far today, do we?" observed Butler, laughing.

His tone was not only so benignant, but so utterly without bitterness that Janet felt that if there were a decent instinct in Harsen it would respond now. But no longer did she look for admirable traits in him. During the entire interview he had been bitter, surly, domineering, and in the matter of the salaries, to the last degree inconsiderate. To her he had become an unfeeling, inhuman thing. A friendship with him, she was convinced, would be forever impossible, even if Butler did form a business association with him. She was dreading to hear his ugly tones again when he spoke, and she gasped with surprise.

"Let's see now if we can't make something out of this. We've got three points where we don't seem to agree. Come around to this side of the table. That's right. . . . Now, we'll put 'em down. First, there's that checking question and —"

His entire manner had changed; she could feel a new

atmosphere. As quickly as his self-consciousness before had disappeared, so now his bullying had gone.

There was a pause. She knew Harsen was writing.

"The stock percentages," she heard him say genially.

Another pause.

"And the salaries. Of course I think pretty strongly my way about all three of those points. But you do, too. I wouldn't think much of you if you didn't. But let's see now—there must be a way out."

In the lull Janet took heart and with her ear turned toward the door she waited tensely. Harsen resumed.

"How's this?" She heard a pencil slapped down on the bare table.

"First rate," laughed Butler.

"And then there is only this left, eh?" came almost gleefully from the other.

"That's all," agreed Butler, and Janet felt her husband's relief. But she could not form even a guess as to what the outcome had been; the house on the hill might be more remote than ever.

"Well, now, I tell you," pursued Harsen—she was conscious that her indignation was passing—"You're going to be so darned busy selling all that paper you've estimated on and I've got a real hankering to see my name on a regular business check, suppose you just let that point slide?"

"I don't like to, Harsen."

"It isn't much; more a whim of mine than anything else. Come on now, and we're closed up for a long pull."

With the utmost difficulty Janet kept her seat.

"But—" began Butler.

"No, there are no 'buts' between us any longer. Don't make more trading points. You raised all the obstacles that you needed to dicker with. And you did it well! By goodness, I admire you; I'm proud to have such a clever fellow for a partner. But you don't care about preventing me from signing a check now and again when you're out, do you? You've got the one thing you really wanted and you ought to have had. You and your little wife will need the salary."

Janet sank back in the chair. So, after all, Butler had won. Harsen, she reflected, could, perhaps, never be a great friend; but there would undoubtedly be many things between them, especially when, after a few visits at the house on the hill, his self-consciousness with her had worn away. She found herself a little tired. With her hands folded in her lap, she closed her eyes and rocked gently and quietly as the talk in the other room ran on.

"Yes, I got the salary and I know I wanted it. Just to get things closed up I'll give in on the check-signing. Make the changes in the paper."

At this moment Janet was considering where they should place the couch in their new home.

"That's the way to do business," she vaguely heard Harsen rejoin; then, presently, his voice reached her again:

"No, you sign there at the top—that's the idea."

Then Butler was speaking.

"You know, old man, I wouldn't have given you that

last point if I hadn't already quit my job," laughed her husband.

There was a strange silence across the hall.

"Quit your job—already?" A long pause. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Yesterday was my last day. It seemed to me that it wasn't square to keep that job when I was giving all my real thought to this new concern." A brief silence and Butler asked: "But what difference does it make, anyway?" Another silence, protracted, heavy, significant. At length it ended.

"Well, I'll sign anyway," Janet heard Harsen say, with a strange, hard laugh.

Suddenly the girl remembered the lease in the pigeon-hole and tiptoed to the desk. Butler's hearty tones reached her.

"Shake! I guess that makes the firm of Pierce & Harsen."

She tore the paper to bits.

CHAPTER V

A BUSINESS TALK

THE Pierces moved. A month of fascinating activity followed. Butler, his pockets crammed with memoranda, was busy with details of the new concern; Janet, irrepressibly smiling, with the settling of the new home.

"Let's give a house-warming," she declared, when her task was done and from the bottom step of the winding stairs, her hand on the newel post, she was viewing her crowning achievement, the long, low living-room, with its black chintzes and well rubbed mahogany.

"Why?" asked Butler over his shoulder from the desk where he was industriously figuring.

"Why?" she laughed. "Oh, just for fun—just to celebrate!"

"Celebrate what?"

"Oh, this!" and she threw out her arms in embracing gesture. "The new life."

Janet had her wish. They did give a house-warming. It was also a kind of celebration of Butler's advent as an independent factor to the business world.

Everybody came. There was Martha, with her clear, cool eyes, and her thin, cool hands; and John Tremont, as substantial and solemn and unbending as a chunk of oak. They brought with them, to swell the throng, the

Preston Thwaites, who that evening had dined at Ardenwold. Julian Powell, sparkling in evening attire, arrived with Lotta Reynolds, fetchingly and candidly dressed for the stares of men. There was an odd smile on Martha's face as she watched this new friend of Janet's cross the room. The Dalrymple girls, the Pierces' nearest neighbors, one plump and round-bodied, the other long-jawed and high waisted, came from the house next door, and gazed with admiring, wistful eyes upon Janet and her new home. Even Mrs. Fielding had been stirred forth and muffled in wraps, which suggested shawls, she was eased heavily from Charles Winter's limousine. Butler, tall, deliberate, smiling gravely, kept fitting dance records. Janet, in a gown of bird's-egg blue with trim little slippers of silver gray, was radiant. She beamed upon every one, especially her mother and Martha. Both of these cherished beings she embraced with impulsive suddenness countless times. The celebration went on until midnight, with Winter, in the shadows of the couch, looking on, his head tipped back, bird-like, and upon his face a smile that was almost a grin.

Meanwhile, Butler also had brought his first and most immediate tasks to completion. The new corporation had been properly formed; the formalities to make him the President and Harsen the Vice-President and Treasurer had been duly executed; offices had been secured—four rooms well up in a skyscraper, looking down romantically upon acres of smoke-tufted roofs. In the furnishing of these offices Janet could not restrain her-

self from taking a hand. Butler smilingly stepped aside and let her have her way. Harsen faded from view. He merely left his Brooklyn address and said to drop him word when everything was in readiness to move in. It was a work of love for Janet, and she set herself ardently about it. The walls she had tinted a soft blue; the partners' offices she furnished with cherry desks and chairs; in the small reception room she hung inexpensive, rather characterless, etchings from a nearby art store. At length all was done, even to the lettering on the outer door, and Butler sent for Harsen. He appeared promptly; stroked his head in perplexity when he saw the colouring of the walls; said he would have preferred desks that wouldn't scratch when he put his feet upon them, and declared that by way of decoration in the reception-room he would have selected a touched-up photograph of a mill, with plenty of smoke pouring from a chimney.

Janet was disappointed, but her disappointment did not last long. Life was sweeping on too magnificently and gloriously for her to give heed to much else than the engrossing business of living it. Every day seemed an overflowing measure; the concerns of the home, the care of the child, the widening range of their friendships, most of all a contemplation of the marvellous vistas of the future opening up for her, gave her plenty of activity and crowded her mind. The girl had a sense of being wafted along on a wave of happiness. Ecstatic months went by, during which it seemed that one day was smiling her on to the next, and she had

moments when she would compose herself and close her eyes in an effort to realise the keen zest of her existence.

Regarding the new enterprise, Butler, being a taciturn person, never had much to say. He went about his affairs with a sort of unemotional evenness. In the mornings he caught the 8:17 into town and in the evening the 5:30 out. That was what most other men in Tuckerton did, and to Janet an adherence to that schedule somehow constituted being "in business." She did not think much about the great venture. Under Butler's guiding hand, of course, all was going well, and she lived on in as comfortable and complacent a confidence as a winging bird coursing through the blue.

"You're exactly like most women," Winter told her, with a shake of his big head. "If your husband sits in an office from nine till five you're certain that your life's problems are solved."

"Oh, mine are," laughed Janet, with flashing eyes, and Winter, lowering his glance, reflectively stroked his chin.

"Butler work much at night?" he presently asked.

"Oh, Butler's a great worker!" affirmed Janet.

"Yes, lately he has been working at night. He mustn't do it. It's bad for him."

"What's he do?"

"Oh, I don't know. He didn't exactly explain. Something Mr. Harsen wanted him to get up. Estimates, I think he said."

"Something Harsen wanted?" mused the lawyer. And then after a pause, "Estimates, eh?"

The talk left no impression on the girl. Soon it had dropped far back into the subconscious recesses of her mind.

It was January—a dazzlingly, bright, hilariously cheerful Sunday afternoon. Outside there were six inches of fine powder-like snow that crinkled beneath the foot and gave a whitish glare to the clear, pale sunshine which slanted through the long main room of the Pierces' home. A fire smouldered comfortably and genially within the hearth; the baby tumbled about the floor. Janet's languid thoughts, such as they were, concerned a birthday party she had planned for the boy. On the coming Friday he would be a year old.

She heard Butler stamping the snow from his shoes on the doorstep outside and she leaned forward to light the burner beneath the tea-kettle. Her husband came in, clear-eyed and red-cheeked, tugging at his gloves. With his back to the fire he drank his tea, gravely and silently. In the past months Butler's silences had grown.

"It's the confounded business," he had once explained.

Janet watched him finish the last of his cup and reached to take it from him. A sense came to her that afternoon, for some reason, he was in a mood for talk. She settled back in her chair and waited expectantly while he lighted a cigarette.

"Well, Janet, I'm a lot encouraged," he finally began; "the business is really beginning to go." This was the most definite and formal statement he had made to her about the new enterprise since the firm began its operations.

"I'm delighted, but I knew it would go," put in Janet.

"We had a great week last week," continued Butler meditatively and slowly between puffs, "and I've just landed a really big order for a special grade of coated that opens out a whole new line to us. Most firms doing our general sort of business have been selling it. It's the first time we've been able to get in, and it looks as if there were big profits there."

"Oh, that's splendid, Butler!" exclaimed Janet, with delight. "Things ought to move very fast from now on, shouldn't they?"

"Well, faster than they have moved," acquiesced Butler quietly. "The business is growing. I'm bringing Harsen out tomorrow night to go over matters."

"That's nice!" observed Janet, and as no questions occurred to her about the new order and as Butler volunteered nothing further, the subject died. But when half an hour later, she gathered up her child and mounted the stairs, Janet was infinitely at peace with herself; and to be at peace with herself was Janet's first concern.

Harsen came out the next night. Since the new firm was formed he had made several visits to the house on Tuckerton Hill. Janet had put forth every effort to

break down the wall of his self-consciousness. Although these efforts had involved a certain degree of strain, she felt she had been partially successful. Upon each succeeding visit he had seemed a little more at ease, and once she had got him to talk at length about his family; his father, who had been a brick-layer; his mother, who despite years of ill-health had managed their home and saved from her husband's meagre wages. Although Janet had not found that warm ideal of friendship which her eager enthusiasm had first pictured, conversation was easier than upon the occasion of his visit at Meadowhedge. But, upon this Monday evening, Harsen had not been in the house fifteen minutes before Janet felt that everything had in some unaccountable way slipped back; he seemed unresponsive and difficult.

"Let me see, Mr. Harsen," she began when they had found their places at the table, "this is your fifth or sixth visit?"

"Fifth, I believe," he said, with abrupt solemnity, inclining his head toward her. There was a pause.

"Did you walk up from the station this evening?"

"Pierce was good enough to get a hack," he returned, and then was silent.

"Generally Butler gets his exercise by going up and down the hill. It's steep enough to keep him in good trim. I think it's one of the real advantages of this place—the exercise Butler gets. He doesn't have to bother with gymnasiums and the things so many business men must go in for."

"No doubt that is an advantage," was all that

Harsen said. Butler had nothing to offer. Janet was uncomfortable and covered her embarrassment by talking rapidly.

"Of course, that's only one of the many good points we've discovered in this place," she said. "There is so much more space in which the baby can play, the neighbours are so much pleasanter, I'm so much nearer Martha—that's my sister, you know; Martha Tremont—and perhaps most of all we have here a sense of livableness and freedom we never had in Meadowhedge."

"Very pleasant, I'm sure," observed Harsen gravely. She simply could not make him talk, and Butler was strangely unhelpful, too.

After dinner Janet went promptly upstairs and left the partners, a litter of papers spread before them, at the round table near the fireplace. Harsen was bending forward over a blue-bound document, scowling, his eyes shaded with one hand; and Butler, leaning back in the shadow, was regarding him. The custom had been established that when Butler was devoting his evening to business discussion Janet should take herself out of the way. This was partly because she could understand little of what might be said, but chiefly because Butler had once asked her not to linger downstairs when he had affairs to talk over. "It's just embarrassing all around, my dear," he had explained in kindly fashion, holding her hand. So tonight Janet took refuge in the bedroom, where the baby now slept, and putting a screen around the boy's crib, began plying her industrious needle on a new birthday frock for him.

It was a long, quiet evening for Janet. She sewed and hummed softly to herself and thought of things which Julian or Martha or even John Tremont might say to her on the occasion of her party about her boy, her beautiful boy. She wondered, too, what present Butler would have for him; perhaps he might have a tiny surprise for her, too. Every few moments she rose and peeped at her child, tucking the blankets a little more snugly around his chin. Then she returned on tiptoe to her sewing and to her dreams. Now and again a mumble of conversation reached her from below—no words or sentences, for the bedroom door was closed, but just the murmuring sound of the talk flowing back and forth, which told her that Butler and his partner were still at it. Her mind turned to the growing business and to Butler, and she had a keenly joyous elation at his success. At ten she began to prepare for bed, and as she brushed her hair, which fell below her waist and was rich and glossy in the soft glow of the yellow lights by her dressing-table, she could not resist smiling to herself in the mirror; everything, indeed, was falling out wonderfully. After a last peep at her boy, she raised the window, snapped the lights, and was beneath the covers. She knew she was happy.

It was after eleven when Janet awoke. Her nose and forehead were cold. She reflected instantly that Butler must have allowed the furnace to die down. A nipping wind shook the curtains and she shivered. Her mind flew to the child, and in a second more she was pattering across the floor. Without pausing for slippers or

wrap, she opened the door to the hall and in her night-dress ran to the closet on the other side of the stairway. She dug out blankets and was on her way back to her room when voices came up to her.

"I tell you that the estimates were yours."

"You accepted them."

"You made them and you fell down."

"I did my best."

"That's irrelevant."

"You call this partnership?"

"I call it business."

"It's—"

Janet was standing by the banister rail, clutching it for support. The hate in those tones! Every word, every syllable, was packed with bitterness. In Harsen's voice there was a terrifying and overwhelming finality; in Butler's a quivering rage. Was this the thing which went on in those pretty blue-tinted offices, fitted with such loving care? What lives of poisonous feeling were these men living? The girl in her night-dress shivered from nervousness and cold.

"Those are my terms." It was Harsen who had spoken—calm, contemptuous, brutal.

"'Sh-'sh!" came from Butler. Janet, trembling, crept back into her room.

The girl lay in bed staring up into blackness. Time dragged agonisingly. The little night-clock on the bureau ticked. Now and again the baby turned in its sleep and sighed heavily. A pallid oblong of light, from the tall road-lamp without, lay on the wall of the room.

The dead hum of voices reached her from below. She tried to reason about the thing which had happened. She could not; it had all been too sudden, too totally foreign to all her thoughts and imaginings; too strange, fleeting, bewildering; an uncanny, weird thing of the night. She merely waited for Butler to come to her.

After a great while she heard footsteps in the hall below. Then the door banged, and she knew Butler was going with Harsen to the station.

Despite the worry on her mind, she felt a little drowsy, but she did not sleep. At length she heard the sound of the distant train. In another fifteen minutes she knew Butler would have returned. She took a deep breath and shut her eyes, against strangely shaped, dancing stars, that kept torturing the darkness. At length the door downstairs opened and closed softly.

"What has happened?" Janet cried, raising herself on her elbow in bed as Butler came with cautious steps into the bedroom.

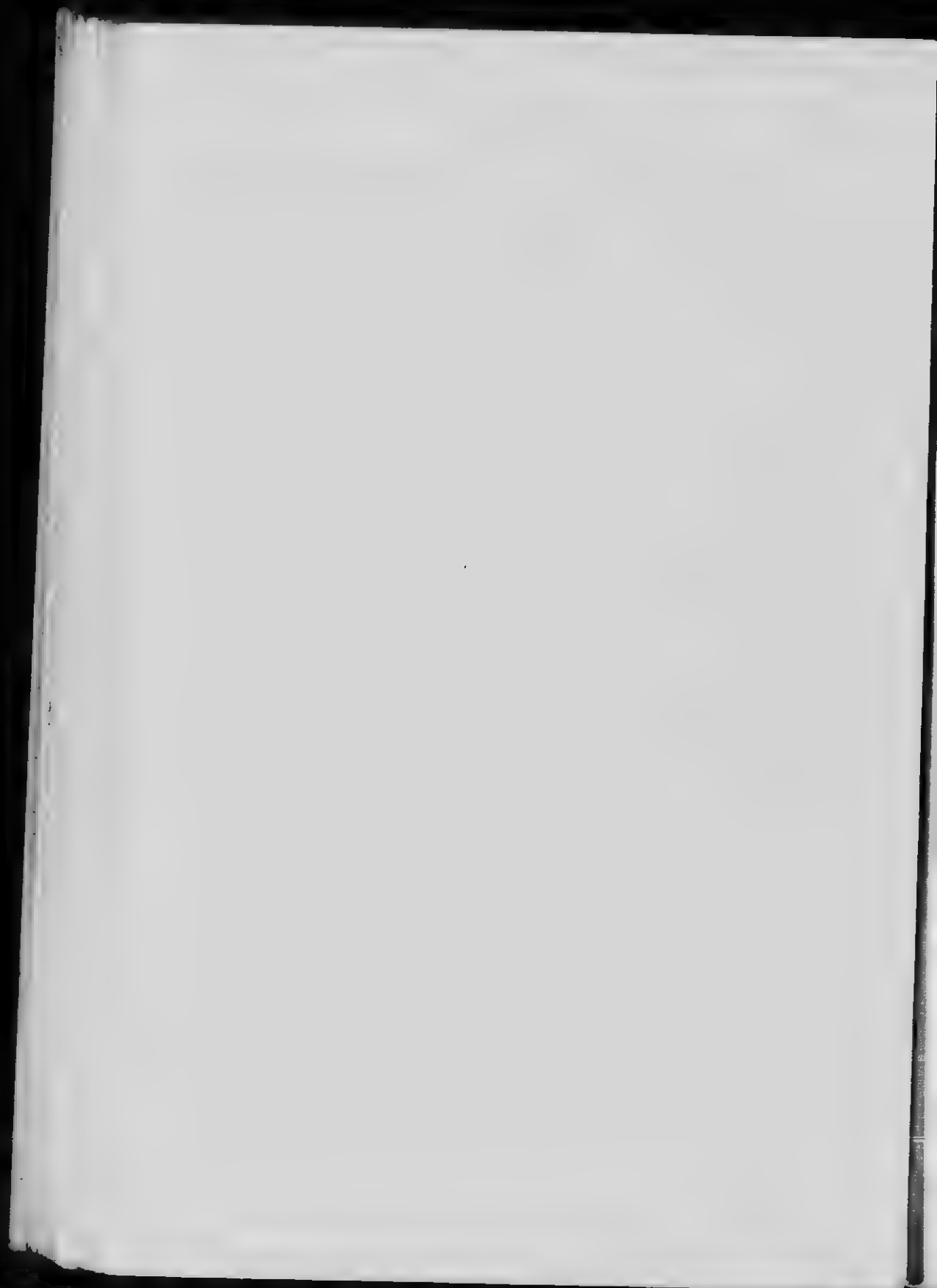
"Happened?" echoed Butler in a whisper. "Nothing, dear! Why?"

"Oh, Butler, something must have happened!" she went on tensely as he turned on a light. "I was in the hall. I heard your voices. They were terrible; oh, terrible, Butler!" He looked at her with a strained, weary smile. "It's your imagination. It was merely a business discussion, and no different—"

"What about?" demanded Janet in a sharp undertone.



He looked at her with a strained, weary smile. "It's your imagination. It was merely a business discussion."



"Oh, dearest, honestly I'm too dead tired to go into it now. It was nothing, nothing to worry about. I'll explain it all to you in the morning. Just one of those arguments which are the everyday events of business."

"I don't understand! I don't understand!" she exclaimed passionately, with a shake of her head. "Those tones! Oh, the hate of them! It must have been something, something horrible."

Butler came around and sat on the edge of the bed beside her. He put his arms around her slim shoulders and she dropped back upon the pillows. Janet noticed through her night-dress how cold his hands were.

"Come, dearest, you're tired. There is absolutely nothing to worry about. We've this big order and we had an argument about financing it. That was all. It's awfully late and awfully chilly, and I'm all in or I'd tell you about it now. Go to sleep! You need rest badly. Everything will look differently in the morning. There, dear, quiet down."

He kissed her, and his warm embrace soothed her. The night did distort and make the simplest things grotesque; she would wait till morning and view matters then. At breakfast, perhaps, they could have a good talk. She drew Butler's head down, stroked his smooth back hair and kissed him.

"All right, dearest," she said, and turning, pulled the covers up close to her chin.

That night the baby's restless sighs later became tiny, pitiful groans and then thin whimperings. Janet twice rose and patted his back. Each time she noted Butler's

heavy breathing; he was indeed exhausted. He worked too hard, anyway. The child's restlessness increased. Once he cried out loudly. Butler turned and buried his head deeper between the pillows and his long, muscular arms. Janet found her wrapper and slippers and took the child softly down the hall to the guest-room.

It was nearly dawn before Janet and her boy fell into a troubled, weary sleep, the ungrateful sleep which comes in that dead, chill hour before a winter sunrise. When she awoke the room glistened with the bright, new day. Beside her the boy breathed evenly and quietly, the night's struggle over. She rubbed her eyes, and forthwith a sense of heaviness crept over her. A minute more and the very tones and inflections which had reached her at the stair-head the evening before were reëchoing in her ears. She rose cautiously and went into the hall.

"Butler!" she called softly.

There was no answering word.

"Butler!"

She hurried to their bedroom. His clothes were gone. She looked at the small night-clock. It was nine-thirty. When she called the maid, she learned that Butler had had his breakfast and been gone for more than a hour.

Disappointment was Janet's first feeling. She did not in the least blame Butler; it was part of his kindness and consideration not to have broken in on her few hours of sleep! and, of course, he had to go to business and could not have waited for her. She called it merely a piece of ill-luck that the baby should have

spoiled her rest, and she not have been up in time for the talk she so much desired. But she could not put the sudden, startling event of the night entirely from her, and there came a hollowness within her, as she sat on the edge of the bed, trying to summon courage to begin the day.

However, a cold bath, coffee, her daily tasks with her child, and a vigorous walk down the hill to the village pharmacy, through the dry, sharp morning air, brought her home by eleven o'clock in an easier mind. The disappointment, the heaviness of spirit, the tugging nervousness were gone. Her memory of what had occurred in the gloom of the uncertainly lighted hall, where she had stood trembling, her senses only half-collected, underwent a healthy change. In the bright and sparkling atmosphere of her living-room the talk she had unintentionally overheard took on the aspect of a misshapen and deformed thing, and when she sat down to her luncheon all that remained was a vague, undefined kind of worry lurking somewhere at the back of her consciousness.

Between luncheon and four o'clock Janet's thoughts were more engaged with the approaching birthday celebration than with her husband's affairs. She settled herself comfortably in the window-seat with her sewing basket and the frock which she was making. The boy slept upstairs; the maid clattered softly in the kitchen; it was a normal afternoon in the Pierce home. At four o'clock the gargoyle knocker on the front door beat vigorously. With the half-finished dress in her hand,

she herself answered. It was a special-delivery letter; the handwriting was in Butler's large, half-formed characters.

"Dearest Girl," it read, "I have to go West to see Uncle on business. As I told you last evening, there is absolutely no cause for worry. Just put everything from your mind and I shall be back Friday evening in time for our grand little party. I didn't want to disturb you this morning. Leaving on the three o'clock train. With fondest thoughts and love for you, B." Then there was a postscript: "Don't worry and I'll telegraph how I make out."

Janet read this letter standing in the middle of the room, her black chintzes, her mahogany, her white woodwork around her and the fire crackling. Suddenly her limbs went heavy. She dragged to the window seat. The envelope, with its blue stamp, smudged over with ink, fell to the floor, unnoticed. She read the note once again, and turning, looked out at the flat, glistening surface of the snow. Presently she discovered that her cheeks were burning and her eyelids smarted.

She went upstairs to their bedroom and opened the closet door. Butler's small black travelling bag was gone. She turned to the bureau; his hair brushes had been packed. She opened the drawers and knew instantly that collars, shirts, handkerchiefs, the necessities for a few days' trip, had been taken. Butler had departed that morning with the full intention of being away for several days, almost the first and certainly the longest separation of their married life.

A stray memory came to Janet of an afternoon in Central Park, overlooking a wind-blown lake, when they had vowed that never for a night would they be separated; that was while they were engaged. But that vision did not linger long; hot blood was boiling through the girl's veins.

To her, at first, it appeared that there was something almost stealthy in this departure of Butler's; not only that, but something sinister, also. For a moment she walked rapidly up and down the room, then dropped dejectedly into a chair. Perhaps Butler had even known the night before, at the very moment he was holding her in his arms, that he was going. Certainly if he were to be away for several days he should have roused her that morning, no matter if her night had been broken. In any case he could have telephoned, given a chance for a few pressing questions. By writing he had blocked her completely; left her floundering in her unhappiness and uncertainty. She didn't like it; she couldn't understand. An odd shudder ran through her. She shook herself and went downstairs again.

A weakening sense of loneliness and helplessness came over her. There she found herself, in the house which now seemed infinitely big and unfilled, left to face her three days and three nights her worry and bewilderment alone. She wondered if she could pull through. For almost the first time in her life she felt she had not been treated kindly. And it was Butler who had done it! She was stunned, and she sat with her chin in her white palms and stared into the fire.

It was a relief when the baby cried. There was a deeper tenderness in her touch when she lifted him from the crib, and her troubled spirit calmed and cleared when she pressed her own hot cheek against his. As she turned her attention to this ordinary occupation of her life, her anger cooled and the keenest edge of her anxiety seemed to blunt. She cooed and chattered at her boy and kissed his dimpled hands as she worked his tiny garments on him. Twice she snuggled him warmly to her and paused for a moment to stroke the delicious softness of his neck. She began brushing the boy's sparse hair, softer than a skein of silk. And those ears! Butler's ears, all over again. She could not be angry with Butler—brave, strong, upstanding Butler! Back of all this mystery somewhere lay wisdom. He was working out his problems—her problems they were, too. She had only to wait. He would return and all would be clear. Everything would be perfectly understandable then, and to carry this sickening load of worry was silly. Faith! She recalled what she had once said to Charles Winter, and she hated herself for her half-hour of disloyalty to the man whom, among all men, she most trusted. She rumbled her child in a violent embrace and thought she had banished her fears and doubts.

Wednesday was a day during which, despite Janet's loyal efforts, anxiety kept pestering her. Throughout the morning an insistent nervousness beset her. She did not permit herself to think and she moved in a kind of choking fog of unhappiness. She continued all

afternoon desperately to reassure herself that all was well, but she was not able to read; she was not able to sit still. Evening came and she sighed through a lonely, tasteless meal, and after dinner collapsed, spiritless and benumbed, into Butler's armchair in the corner of the living-room.

For the hundredth time she started round the wearying circle of her problem; Harsen's reserves and silences at dinner, the talk in the night, Butler's sudden and inexplicable departure, his letter—it was all to her a hopeless and terrifying jumble. "Don't worry!" How Butler had repeated and repeated that phrase. In a vain attempt to reassure herself she spoke the words aloud. They had a hollow sound in her ears. "I'll telegraph how I make out." What did that mean, and why, under heaven, should he travel a thousand or so miles to see his uncle? There was something wrong, but—what? It might be everything, it might be nothing. It was the uncertainty that was gnawing at her.

For an hour, sitting there, the girl fought at her misery like a blind man under attack. Then there was a roar of a motor climbing the hill. It drew nearer, but she did not move. She could hear the chains on the wheels clank and scrunch in the snow. The machine came to a stop in front of the door. The pulsations of the motor beat out upon the winter silence. There was a brisk rap on the knocker. She was forcing herself on her feet when a flood of cold air swept the room and the door banged. Wrapped in huge furs, a grey cap,

with slits for the eyes, completely covering his face, in walked Julian Powell.

Instantly the girl had a sense of relief. Here was some one who would not only break her brooding loneliness, but some one who, understanding business, and being the family's closest friend, might give her the key to the besetting riddle that tortured her. He stood before her in his bulky robes, a heaven-sent messenger.

"Julian!" she exclaimed.

"Alone?" he asked, whipping off his headgear.

"Butler's away," she supplied, watching him work up the buttons of his coat.

"Away?" he echoed in surprise.

"Yes—on business. I'm so glad you came."

"I had a hard day. I'm sick of the town. I thought a glimpse of you would do me good."

He crossed to the window-seat and shed his things there in a pile. Janet dropped into her chair again.

"But why didn't you go with him?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, it was a long, hurried trip. He went to see his uncle, you know."

"And left you alone!" There was faint reproach in his tone. Janet caught it and flushed. He sat down facing her.

"Isn't that a new development in the Pierce family?"

The girl did not answer. Her mind went rocketing off with a new idea—she must tell Julian nothing. At first it was an instinct which told her that. Then she

perceived the light in which she would place Butler if she recounted the facts. Loyalty demanded that she lock her unhappiness within her. Julian's calm scrutiny was upon her, and he was smiling faintly. She was floundering for a reply to his question when he observed abruptly: "You look tired."

"I am—a little," she confessed, the weight of her anxiety bearing upon her again.

"What's the trouble?"

"Nothing," was all that she was able to reply.

"I know better," he asserted. "What's wrong? You look worried!"

"Nothing—nothing at all!"

"You're a poor dissembler, Janet. Tell me!"

"Not a thing," she repeated, mustering a friendly smile for him. "Nothing, except the baby's had me up a good deal at night, lately."

"Are you worried about him?"

"No."

"What did Butler go to see his uncle for?"

"You do pry, don't you, Julian?" she countered, and burned to lay bare her perplexity.

"An old friend's privilege," he rejoined, and eyed her gravely. There was a silence.

"How's the business?" Powell shot out.

"Oh, doing splendidly," Janet returned, with false enthusiasm.

"It is, eh?"

"Yes—new orders. Everything's booming."

"When did Butler make up his mind to go away?"

"It was very sudden," she replied, telling herself that no matter how the floodgates pressed she must not give up.

"Well, I think you might tell me what's wrong. Perhaps I could help," he declared, reflectively examining his hands. This spurred Janet.

"But there's nothing to tell. I don't understand you, Julian. There's nothing—nothing at all," she cried.

"Ridiculous!" he pronounced, and fell silent.

Her head on the back of the chair, she watched him through half-closed lids. To Janet there was always something calming and reassuring in Julian's presence. He was so unhurried, unperturbed, collected, and yet, in his friendship with her, so responsive. She was glad he had come, even if she could not unburden herself to him. As she looked at him, immaculate and well-trimmed, sitting there before her with his slight frown it struck her afresh, and very forcibly, how clean and firm like a finely polished bit of wood, Julian was. A good, staunch support!

"Where's Lotta Reynolds?" Janet asked to break the silence.

"Oh, gadding about!"

"I should think she would be sick of that sort of thing—cocktails, dinners, shows, cabarets."

"I imagine she is."

"Well, why does she do it?"

"What else can she do? I suppose you and Butler are the only real people, living real lives, whom she

knows. That's one reason why she likes you so much."

"Does she like us?" Janet brightened faintly.

"Oh, immensely. And you people can do a lot for her. A woman can't go on having only that miserable set of friends she has. In time it's bound to get her. Give her all of your kind of companionship that you can. She says that to see you two people together sets her up for a week."

"I don't see why!"

"Oh, because she thinks you're really in love, I guess." Julian lowered his eyes and said no more.

"Well, we will see her—see a lot of her," affirmed Janet shortly.

The topic turned; for half an hour the talk ran on desultorily. All the while Janet, more and more, felt her anxiety settling heavily upon her. If any one save Butler had cast the blight that was upon her spirits it would have been so simple, so comforting to pour her trouble out to this friend. Oh, if she could only find relief—only discover the key to the riddle! Suddenly Julian jumped to his feet and jerked on his furs. Hat in hand, he walked over and stood above her. She tried to smile up at him.

"Won't you tell me?" he brought forth.

"But, Julian, there is nothing," she emphasised, sitting straight. He did not reply. For a second longer he eyed her and then made slowly for the door. She followed. On the edge of the vestibule he paused. They were looking full at one another now. In an in-

stant more he would be gone. Her tormenting thoughts would close even more relentlessly in upon her.

"Good-night," Powell said, and turned. She heard his hand on the door-knob. Silence, bed, and staring darkness with her groping misery and her unreasoned fears! Two more days of this torment before Butler would return! After all it probably was nothing—nothing, at least, which, in a flash, a person trained to business could not explain. The knob clicked. Janet, a handkerchief at her lips, her eyes heavy with distress, a faint pucker in her chin, stood uncertain, irresolute, in the middle of the floor. After all, Powell was their closest friend.

"Julian!" she called sharply.

She heard him step back across the vestibule, but she did not wheel about and face him.

"Yes?" he asked. Another flash lighted her mind. No, it must not be done. Give Butler a chance and he would explain.

"Oh, nothing! Never mind. Good-night."

For a second Powell lingered and then went out.

CHAPTER VI

THE TESTING OF THE TREMONTS

THE telephone in the Pierce home was in a small, misplaced closet off the dining-room. It was Thursday and about eleven o'clock in the morning. Janet found herself with the receiver to her ear. In a moment of desperate impulsiveness she had flown to the instrument and given the number of her husband's office.

"Yes?" came over the wire.

"Is that you, Mr. Harsen? This is Mrs. Pierce."

"Yes?"

The girl had no spirit for preliminaries. She was wearied of floundering in a soggy world of trouble.

"Won't you please tell me, Mr. Harsen, what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" came back in even tones. "Is anything wrong?"

Janet was baffled. There was a long pause. Finally she spoke:

"Why has Butler made a trip West?" Her tortured spirit had forced the words out. Another long pause; then from Harsen:

"Hadn't you better ask your husband that?" His curtness bruised her.

"I suppose so," she assented meekly, and hung up

the receiver. As she walked from the closet her knees were weak.

For a time she lay on the couch, but presently shook herself, as if to cast off her cloak of distress, and leaped to her feet. In the vestibule she found a coat and set out. Down the Tuckerton hill she plunged, ploughed through paths unopened since the snowfall, struggled through a patch of wood, even vaulted a stone wall in a valiant effort to lift her spirit from the quicksands in which it floundered. Despite the physical exertion her mind kept up its ceaseless grind; no light came to her. When, with high mounting colour, at quick pace, she approached the house, she was still hopelessly involved in her perplexity and, with a sigh from far within her, reflected it was still another day and a half before Butler would be with her again.

On the doorstep stood a messenger-boy, a pinched-faced person of twenty, with an amusing, toothless grin.

"Hello, Mrs. Pierce!" he called, with familiar geniality. "Got a telegram for you." Janet ran the remaining ten yards.

"Oh, give it to me, give it to me quickly! It's most important!" she cried.

"Is it?" observed the messenger nonchalantly, digging into the green-edged pockets of his overcoat. "Gee, where is it?" Janet almost danced in her impatience and felt her heart pounding at sickening speed.

"Oh, do hurry; you must hurry!" she exclaimed. He looked at her in surprise.

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"Well, ain't I?" he answered. He was now thrusting his hand into his inner pockets.

"Twenty-five cents delivery, please," he said, finally producing the telegram.

Janet gave no heed. She ripped open the envelope.

"No luck. Back for party. Love. BUTLER."

She saw it all; those words, "no luck," seemed to focus and give meaning to everything. A feminine quality of mind told her, in one everlastingly lucid flash, what the entire terrifying, mystifying situation had been. Harsen's silences, the talk in the night, Butler's odd departure, his letter, his last words, "no luck," all were now clear. The telegram she held in her hand was a message of dependency; the message of a man who had gone after her and hadn't got it.

Janet never hesitated. Within the imperceptible part of a second after she had read the signature she knew what she would do. It would be cataclysmic, but it would have to be carried out; her stifling unhappiness could not be endured; it was choking all life out of her. Butler also must be relieved; she thought of his misery. Driven by a force far stronger than her reason or her will, moving like an automaton, she set about her task; and at ten minutes before two she stood, trembling slightly, and with blue circling shadows making large her anxious eyes, before the door of the Tremont apartment, waiting for the maid to answer her ring.

Martha, as usual, was reading. Janet found her

stretched on a couch, before a fireplace, in a room, rich and serene, by virtue of what had not been put into it; the room of a person sophisticated in the arts of comfort and tranquillity. As the girl paused for a second on the threshold, leaning slightly forward in her eagerness, her sister turned her calm and estimating eyes to her in a friendly inquiry.

"Hello!" said Martha casually.

"I'm so glad you're here," returned Janet, with a sigh. Going to her sister's side she kissed her. Mrs. Tremont lifted her face.

"Anything wrong?" asked Martha, with apparent indifference.

"John home?" queried Janet by way of reply. Her sister nodded.

"I must see him. I must see you . . . h," declared Janet intensely, extending a hand to pull Martha to her feet. Mrs. Tremont yielded.

"Counting his butterflies," explained Martha, trailing ahead toward the long hallway. The collection, classification, and cataloguing of butterflies was John Tremont's chief winter occupation, and he spent endless hours in perfect quiet, in a room arranged high with wide cherry-wood slides, each slide bearing a weird Latin name and numeral. To this room Martha, her slippers clanking on the hardwood floor, now led the way. She carefully knocked before she turned the heavy brass knob; Janet was pressing close behind her.

"Here's a friend of yours," prefaced Mrs. Tremont,

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holding aside the door. John glanced up from a tray which he had set upon the big flat desk near the window; he had been examining a gay-winged specimen through a scientific-looking, black-enameled microscope. Janet was in the middle of the room before he spoke.

"Ah, Janet, my dear," he said, "an unexpected pleasure, I'm sure." He came around the desk and held out his hand. Janet took it and squeezed it warmly. She did not speak because she was choking with nervousness.

"Sorry to bother you, John," put in Martha apologetically and speaking directly to her husband, "but there's evidently something quite tremendous on little sister's mind."

"No bother," returned John, with a stiff bow, his hands at the lapels of his coat. He took a stand before the white-tiled fireplace. Martha collapsed in a deep chair; Janet, her hands in her grey muff, remained standing in the middle of the floor, facing her brother-in-law.

"It's most serious!" began Janet simply, and compressed her lips. Her tone was alarming in its gravity. Mrs. Tremont glanced quickly at her. John transferred his hands to his trousers pockets.

"I hardly know how to begin," went on Janet, a little breathlessly. "It's awful! Oh, Martha, it is awful!" She turned toward her sister.

"Go on, dear," urged Martha.

"I suppose I must," said Janet. She paused and for a moment studied John's expressionless, perfectly

composed face. "It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do," she finally added, and then shot forth, "John, we're in fearful trouble."

She stopped. The perpetual look of detachment disappeared from Martha's face and real distress came into her languid eyes; John frowned, shifted restlessly, and observed:

"Indeed?"

Janet bit her lip. She was still standing in the middle of the room, her slight figure sharply traced against the dull, winter light from the window. She rushed on, as if she dared not pause a moment longer.

"It's money! I must have money," she said, her voice trembling. "It's for the business and only for a little while. Butler's gone West. He'll be back soon and straighten everything out. But I must have it, and I knew if I came to you—"

She trailed off weakly, dropped into a chair, and turned her face, which seemed almost to glisten in the whiteness of her distress, up to her brother-in-law. There was a long silence. At length Tremont, without moving, spoke. All he said was—

"Ah!"

There were volumes in the word—volumes which Janet felt rather than understood. She could fairly see her brother-in-law drawing a cold, hard armour about himself. Something very near terror came into her heart. Her head swam giddily for a second and she dashed a hand across her eyes.

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"Yes, money," she choked, blinking back tears.

"I see," observed Tremont in a dead monotone and pursed his lips.

"John!" put in Martha. There was a depth, a vigour, a warning in the word that cleared the air. Janet pulled herself together.

"You see," the girl went on earnestly, "I don't know much about it all. I'm only certain the firm must have money." She stopped and then broke out, "Oh, for the last few days I've been desperate. I can't stand it! I can't stand it! If you only understood, John, dear, how I hate this. But I can't go on! I can't live this way! You must help!"

Tremont was silent; he rocked himself back and forth on his heels and studied the face looking up to him.

"Can't you tell us more about it?" asked Martha quietly.

"Tell?" exclaimed Janet. "There's nothing to tell except that I must have money!"

"How much?" questioned John. There was absolutely no clue in his voice and his expression was bafflingly steady.

"I don't know," answered Janet simply. "I'm awfully at sea. Butler was going to explain it all, but had to go away before he had a chance."

"You want me to help you, but you don't know to what extent, then?" said Tremont, with a shade of brusqueness.

"Oh, just say you'll help," pleaded the girl, throw-

ing her arms in a wide gesture of appeal. "That's all, and it's easy."

There was a tremendous silence in the room. The girl's last words had been uttered in a high key—so shrill, indeed, that it was torturing that no one should speak. Tension and her growing fears showed in Janet's face. Her innocent and trusting eyes were wide, and her lips, at all times sensitive recorders, were trembling. The horrible silence dragged. John coughed.

"You may remember," he observed, "that I considered the capital upon which Butler started somewhat slim?"

"John, that's useless," came sharply from Martha. Janet's mouth was lax with surprise and dismay.

"Very well," replied John, with a bow toward his wife. To Janet the situation was unbelievable; it simply could not be true; she took a desperate plunge.

"May I not telegraph Butler now, that it's all arranged?" she asked thickly.

Tremont did not reply, and the eyes of the two women followed him as he crossed the room, and with great deliberation took a cigar from his desk drawer. He returned slowly and ponderously to the fireplace, where, with his gold cutter, he carefully snipped the end. After a moment he began:

"The situation is difficult, Janet." He was speaking in a kindly, even voice and gazing steadily at the window opposite. "I know nothing of Butler's business, nor of how it has gone."

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"Oh, it's gone splendidly," interjected Janet hopefully. "There are lots of new orders."

"I've never seen a balance sheet or statement," pursued John, without heeding what she had said, "and I'm therefore totally ignorant of its assets. You come to me and ask for money. You don't know how much you require nor, evidently, the purposes for which it is needed. You practically request me to give a blanket promise to back Butler in some difficulty in which he finds himself."

"That's it! That's it exactly," said Janet, brightening, her fears for an instant allayed. "Just say you will help and that will lift this terrible load from my mind! That's all, John, dear."

"But, my dear Janet!" he exclaimed, shaking his head and examining his cigar.

The rising inflection of that tone answered Janet. She looked at her brother-in-law for an instant, white and strained. His eyes did not meet hers. Her hands went to her cheeks; stunned and awestruck, she looked at him.

"I'm afraid John's right," said Martha, with dreadful quiet.

"Right!" cried the girl, half rising from her chair and turning from one averted face to the other. "What do you mean? You don't mean? Oh, you can't! You can't! Oh, it's impossible!"

She was on her feet now and her slim body quivered as she bent toward Tremont.

"Janet, my dear," said John gently, "I'd help you

now if it would do the least good. But it wouldn't. It would be merely pouring money into a sieve. We would have to meet another situation just like this in another six months. If I touched the proposition at all, I would put in enough to clear matters up completely. Don't misunderstand me," he went on hastily, raising a warning hand. "I don't want that type of investment; but if—mind you, if—I did go into such a thing, I'd go into it far enough to be certain of success."

This argument Janet did not even remotely grasp. "I've come to you," she cried, "because I'm in trouble. Aren't you eager to help me? You don't mean you'll let me suffer? You don't mean that if I've abased myself to appeal to you—you, my own brother-in-law, Martha's husband—that you can refuse? Oh no, John! You can't mean that! Perhaps you don't understand. I just want you to help me. I'm desperately miserable!"

Sobs checked her. "Oh, John," she wailed, and tears flooded her thick lashes.

"I know you're unhappy, my dear," said John evenly, "but you'd only be miserable again—just as miserable as you are now—even if I did help this time. And, more than that, the money I might put up would be gone."

"Gone! Butler will pay you. You don't doubt that?" she exclaimed.

"I don't doubt that he would intend to pay me," said Tremont, emphasising the distinction he made.

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And then, moving across the room with an air of finality: "No, Janet, I cannot help you."

Janet buried her face in her hands, her girlish shoulders shaking with emotion.

"You won't help us!" she finally brought forth, between her sobs. "Oh, John! Martha, it isn't true?" She turned to her sister appealingly. "It isn't possible! Not help me now! Leave Butler and me in this! Oh, that's horrible—horrible!"

"Janet, my dear, some day you'll see I'm right," remarked Tremont, from the window where he was standing, as if to remove himself as far as possible from the girl's horrified eyes.

Martha came to Janet's side and put her arms soothingly about her. A long minute ensued. The tumult of Janet's grief subsided a little.

"There—there!" soothed Martha. "John's wise and he's careful. He'd do anything for you if he could really help. Don't feel so badly, Janey."

Presently Janet, with the small ball of her handkerchief, began striving to dry her tears. She did not look over to John. With one hand she clutched tight to Martha's wrist.

A sudden thought struck her. She swung around in her chair to face her sister. Her countenance cleared and her eyes lighted with new hope.

"But you will help me, Martha, won't you?" she cried. "Oh, you'll stand by me. You've your legacy. Oh, say you will. Say you won't desert me. Say it, Martha, dearest; say it."

John, at the window, turned half around. Martha, her eyes closed in distress, drew the girl more tightly to her. Very soberly Mrs. Tremont shook her head.

"Not if John thinks it unwise. I'm guided by him in such matters."

Janet bounded away from her sister. In a wild gesture she threw her arms above her head and then covered her face with her hands.

"You? You not help me, either? Oh, Martha—oh, Martha! That's too cruel—too cruel."

Sobbing without control, she dragged toward the door. Martha gently guided her from the room.

"It's not the money now that matters," she cried as, sitting on the couch in Martha's room, she tried again to dry her eyes, "it's that you failed me, failed me, both of you, when I needed you most. Oh, Martha, how could you? How could you?"

There was poignant distress in Martha's face and from her eyes all their accustomed cool appraisal was gone. She patted the girl's hands and tucked back a stray, moist strand of hair.

"We've not failed you. You'll understand some day," she kept repeating earnestly.

Gradually Janet's convulsive grief died; the sobs which had shaken her ceased. Martha, silent, continued to fondle the small, tense hands. To these caresses Janet gave no heed. At length, in a voice thick with weeping, the girl said simply and quietly: "I must be going." Drawing her veil beneath her chin, she rose and passed down the hallway. Martha did not

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follow, but as Janet reached the door she heard her call: "Good-bye, dear!"

"Good-bye!" answered Janet dully, and passed out. And she was sure as she took herself, wearily and listlessly, along the street, in the soggy, grey afternoon, that never in her life had she been so unhappy.

"They've failed me; they've failed me!" she kept repeating to herself as she choked back fresh tears, "and I'd have done anything, anything at all, for them!"

CHAPTER VII

BEHIND THE PORTIÈRES

JANET's night was restless. Alternately, she plunged her head into the pillows to sob, and covered her moist face with her hands to shut out the darkness. Dreams disturbed her snatches of sleep and left her wide awake, gulping at a lump in her throat. No longer was it the money which she was certain the business needed, nor the distress in which she was sure Butler must be, that kept torturing her. It was the one glaring fact that her own sister and her brother-in-law, both of whom she had loved and idealised, had for her no real measure of affection. In the test, they had shown themselves, she believed, woefully lacking.

Of John it was incredible enough; she had thought he had for her at least a portion of the love she had for him. But of Martha it was beyond all range of conception! A thousand memories and pictures of their lives, so closely interwoven as girls, crowded to her mind through the dismal hours. At each new picture she burst afresh into passionate tears. Morning found her weary, with eyes that were red and tired.

She felt that she must have a warm shoulder upon which to weep her sorrow, and the instinct of all her childhood years reasserted itself. From her mother

alone, it seemed to her, could she find the solace she needed. So she summoned Ruth Dalrymple, from the house nearest theirs, to care for the child. The Dalrymple girls—Ruth and Constance—were nearing the mid-years between twenty-five and thirty. Their existences were meagre, and for the Pierce baby, the only small boy of the neighborhood, each had an affection that made a day in which either one could supervise alone all his small doings, the keenest delight. Janet's heart often suffered a pang when, upon returning after hours in town, she found one of them, still glorying in her task and with eyes unwontedly bright from the joy the child had given. So it was a Dalrymple she summoned this Friday morning, promising to be back in ample time to complete the necessary preparations for the birthday party that evening.

Her mother was in her accustomed place. It was exactly where Janet knew she would find her—in the deep rocking-chair, between the bright, brass fire-fender and the tall window which was rarely opened, because opening it soiled and sooted the white curtains which by half an inch missed the floor. She was engaged exactly as Janet knew she would be, sitting still; sitting still, nursing in turn one soft hand with the other, until with a great sigh she ceased, and began slowly and sorrowfully revolving her thick wedding ring round her finger. Near by, on a convenient table, lay a book. Janet knew that at odd times during the day she would open it, read a few pages, and lay it down again.

"Oh, my precious girl!" cried Mrs. Fielding when

she caught sight of Janet's tense and suffering face. Mother and daughter were almost of the same height, but the older woman was very plump, almost large. She lifted herself by her arms from her chair, and with a few heavy steps forward gathered the girl to her embrace. The tenderness of it brought to Janet a fresh on-rush of tears, and on the large comfortable-ness of her mother's shoulder, she wept. Mrs. Fielding silently patted and soothed her.

"Come, dearest, tell me," she finally urged. Janet lifted her head, and taking both her mother's hands in hers, looked deep into her eyes.

"You'll never go back on me, will you, Mother? You never will?" Janet's words and another glimpse at her daughter's face stirred Mrs. Fielding's emotions. Almost weeping, she exclaimed:

"Dearest, no! Never! But what has happened?" She felt for her chair. Janet took off her coat and tossed her umbrella recklessly on the table. Trying to dry her cheeks, she paced about the room.

"I was in trouble," she began at last, "and I went to John and Martha. Think of it, Mother. John and Martha! And—and—they wouldn't help me. They forsook me! They failed me! Oh, Mother, I can't believe it!"

She paused because more tears were imminent. She bit her lip hard, and then presently added quietly:

"I had a terrible night!"

Mrs. Fielding watched her daughter. "Bring a chair here. Tell me the trouble," she said.

"Oh, the trouble doesn't seem to matter now. It's the other thing—the other terrible thing—Martha and John!" declared the girl, who, ignoring her mother's injunction, still walked the floor. "Do you know, Mother," she added at length, "if you or Butler ever treat me so, I really believe I shall die."

Janet sank down on the arm of Mrs. Fielding's chair. Neither spoke for a long time, and while Janet was seeking to compose herself she glanced about the familiar room, with its odd collection of pictures and furnishings; the Landseer etchings; the shiny horsehair couch of black walnut, concealed in the alcove, with which years ago her mother and father began house-keeping; the deep, thickly-upholstered chair which rocked on springs and represented a later period; the heavy fumed-oak table between the windows; the small low couch divided into three cushioned sections, which the Tremonts had given—all seemed to trace the changing tastes of the years of Mrs. Fielding's life. A sense of the length of time her mother had lived, of the sorrows she had endured, came to Janet. Strangely, there was something in this thought, and also in the boundless familiarity and uncounted associations of kindness and love she had with the room that gave her a feeling of security. No longer was she tossing on a sea of unknown dangers. Presently she was able to tell her story connectedly. Mrs. Fielding was grave and for several moments turned to her habitual trick of nursing her hands.

"You mustn't feel bitterly toward Martha and John," she ventured at last.

"I don't feel bitterly," protested Janet sadly. "I'm just hurt—hurt beyond words."

"I know, dear, but you mustn't be," declared her mother. "They wouldn't hurt you for worlds."

Janet did not reply. She had now seated herself on the couch which stretched in front of the fireplace and was close to Mrs. Fielding's chair. When she looked up it was to say:

"Of course, I've got the other thing yet—this money bother." She was thoughtful and her mother did not speak. Presently Janet added:

"Something's got to be done. It's got to be done quickly. I don't know what I can do, Mother, except turn to you."

Mrs. Fielding was silent. Slowly she kept turning around the wedding ring and once sighed deeply. Janet's eyes went to her mother's face. The pause lengthened. A trace of alarm came into the girl's expression.

"Oh, Mother!" she cried, "you don't mean that you, too—"

"No, no, dearie," protested her mother, raising her hand. "I was just thinking."

"Thinking what?" demanded the girl.

"Thinking what was best to do," her mother replied, and quickly amended, "how best to do it." Janet relaxed and sank back. No word was spoken for a full moment, when Mrs. Fielding declared briefly:

"I must see Charles Winter."

"But, Mother, dearest," pleaded Janet, "you won't fail us? You'll stand by, anyhow, won't you?" There was an imploring eagerness in her white features.

"Of course I will," came from her mother, with an effort at brightness. "I couldn't refuse my little girl—my little girl with so much to learn. Oh, Janet, I wish I could carry your heartaches for you! But never mind! Don't worry any more." She drew her daughter to her and kissed her. "I'll see about things to-day—see Charles Winter. I have to arrange matters like that with him, you know."

"Yes—yes, I know," assented Janet hastily. The alarm of her fleeting doubts was gone. "And you're the dearest mother a girl ever had." Very tenderly she stroked Mrs. Fielding's cheek.

Janet was satisfied. The weight of worry about money for the business, which had returned to her when she had recited the events of the week, was now lifted. That her mother would stand by her meant to Janet that the financial problem was solved. This buoyed her spirits, and the grief within her at the attitude of the Tremonts became somewhat allayed. Indeed, after an hour's talk about the baby and Butler, the new home and the approaching party, she was almost happy and there was real brightness in the farewell smile she threw her mother from the doorway as she left and hurried home.

On the way out on the train, Janet's thoughts kept

reverting to the Tremonts. She wondered if they would, after what had happened, come to the birthday party that evening, and wondered, even more, how she could possibly manage to be kindly and cordial if they did come. There was something which told her that the interview of yesterday and its outcome only made their appearance the more certain. As soon as she had banged her front door behind her, she searched the table hurriedly for any letter which might have arrived from Martha, and called to Miss Dalrymple to ask if there had been any message by telephone. There was no word of any kind, and Janet braced herself for the ordeal of the evening.

Other matters, also, began to pester her mind. With release from the benumbing worry concerning money had come a resentment against Butler, which, despite herself, increased. With a positive shudder, she felt the double humiliation to which she had had to expose herself; first the appeal to the Tremonts; then the appeal to her mother. Some situation—a situation which Butler had not had the consideration to explain to her—had compelled the sacrifice of her cherished and much vaunted ideal of independence and driven her to a self-abasement which it hurt her to contemplate. The furtive and evasive manner in which he had packed his bag, taken his departure, and informed her by letter of his mysterious trip West, again engaged her thoughts, and again she found herself in no very pleasant mood. Everything was in a mess and it was all Butler's fault! She felt that her husband had a good deal to explain,

and he would have to explain it, she told herself, with a positive shake of her head.

This was her state of mind when she set to work to prepare for the evening's party. All afternoon she toiled. Ruth Dalrymple stayed to help her. They lifted the dining-room table, upon which the buffet meal which Janet had planned was to be served, to an end of the living-room. They dragged about chairs, cut sandwiches, made salad, traced the name "Butler Pierce, Jr." in pink frosting on the birthday cake, sewed a final bit of ribbon on the new frock, dusted, polished, and generally made the first floor rooms gleam. The interest and exertion of all this stimulated Janet; and, together with Miss Dalrymple's simple and sentimental chatter, diverted her thoughts. The result was that at seven o'clock, when the Tremonts' lighted limousine drew up at the door Janet discovered, with a slight shock, that she was almost gay. It was not nearly the effort she had expected to be politely cordial to them.

"Come in, Martha; come in, John!" she called from the front step. She returned Martha's kiss and looked her brother-in-law full in the eye as she extended her hand to his. Janet was mildly irritated with herself that she was not more resentful.

Julian Powell, Mrs. Reynolds, and the Dalrymple girls had already arrived. Martha, without removing her wraps, was passing from one to the other offering each in turn a limp hand. John was shedding his heavy coat.

"Was it cold riding out?" Janet asked him, with a

kind of manufactured courtesy as she stood nearby, her hands clasped behind her back.

"Not particularly; I should judge that the temperature in the car was about fifty," he replied, with an obvious effort to overcome his usual stiffness. At this moment Martha brought from her huge, shining muff a good-sized box, which, with her characteristic casualness, she simply tossed on the table, remarking as she did so:

"There's something, Janet, dearest, in which your infant may bury his face if he pleases."

Janet tore the package open and drew forth a heavy, initialed silver porridge bowl.

"That's dear of you, Martha!" she exclaimed.

"John bought it," flung back her sister over her shoulder as she headed off toward the dining-room to deposit her furs. Janet examined the gift. It was a costly thing—a generous present even from a rich sister and brother-in-law. The girl could never harbor ill-will for long.

"How kind of you, John—how good of you," she declared, turning with a smile toward Tremont.

"A pleasure—a great pleasure, I'm sure," returned John, with a solemn bow; and at that moment Butler came in.

Janet threw a searching sudden glance upon him. Two heavy creases of fatigue and strain were evident in his face. Tiny pinched lines at the corners of his eyes told of the heavy thoughts he had been carrying. But on his lips there was his quick warm smile, and in his

touch, as he put his arms over her shoulders and kissed her, the kindliness, the tenderness, the gentleness which with Janet invariably evoked an immediate, welling response. Stronger than any other emotion with her, just then, was sympathy for the man she loved.

At any rate she was far from angry as she held up the baby, very satisfying to her eye in his new frock, and she was eager to relieve him with the news of Mrs. Fielding's promised aid. But no chance offered. Already the candles upon the table where the supper was spread were lighted, and the others were waiting for her to cross the room. She gave Butler's arm an affectionate squeeze and found her place. She had small thought for the hundred and one questions she had planned to fling at her husband at the moment he entered the door.

The party progressed gaily. Butler was his friendly self, making the celebration move with quiet smoothness and success. He was cordial to Julian, paid gay court to Mrs. Reynolds, was kind in turn to the Dalrymple girls, deferential with John, and evidently trying to make himself just as interesting as he was able to Martha. For the baby he had precisely the right degree of fatherly interest, and for Janet as much tenderness as it was decent to show in public. Nor had he failed to purchase the presents, which, before the overwhelming events of the week had pushed the thought from her, Janet had hoped he would bring; for the child, a thoroughly usable spoon; for her, a pair of neat, unornamented gold safety-pins. When, at length, she carried

the bab" off to bed she was proud of her husband and in a completely amiable and forgiving mood. After all, there wasn't much, she half told herself, for Butler to explain.

When she returned downstairs the talk was running on glibly. Julian, his keen, thin-featured face alight, was narrating the steps in the rise to fame of a cabaret dancer. The story was nearing an end when the telephone rang. Janet hurried to the closet in the dining-room where the instrument hung. It was Charles Winter who was calling.

"Janet," he said, "I've seen your mother and I want Butler and that fellow Harsen to be at their office at ten tomorrow forenoon. I'll be there." He spoke with command.

"Very well, Uncle Charles. I'm sure it will be all right," she replied meekly.

"I count upon you to arrange it," he continued peremptorily.

"Yes," came from Janet.

"And, Janet, listen! This is important." There was a new note now, a more friendly and personal one, in his voice. "I want you there."

"Me? Why me?" she rejoined, with a rising inflection.

"Never mind! I want you there," came back over the wire with the former tone of authority. "You understand? You are to be there, without fail. Good-night." And she heard him bang up the receiver.

Janet was puzzling this turn of affairs when she

slowly parted the portières into the other room. The party had broken into groups. Butler was leaning negligently on the newel-post of the stairs. Beside him was John Tremont, a hand concealing his mouth, his eyes upon the floor.

"Yes, we're building fast," came to her in her husband's voice. "Harsen and I hope to have a big thing there before long. I've been tremendously pleased and surprised, taking everything into consideration, at the way the business has gone."

Janet drew back behind the curtains. Her last glimpse was of John, nodding gravely, his hand still at his mouth, his glance still cast down, one knee wiggling nervously.

"It's four months since we started," she could hear Butler continue, an odd and totally new drawl to his tone, "and we've got to about the same point it took White & Stanchfield two years to reach—that is, about the same point in pounds of paper sold."

Janet wanted to rush and bury herself where she could not hear. She writhed. What must be in John's mind! As Butler went on, she could not accept the fact that it was her husband who was speaking. She had never heard him boast before. It was against every article of his training, against every instinct of his nature. And to John Tremont! She strained her arms in helpless shame above her head and brought her hands to her burning cheeks.

"We're hoping," Butler pitifully resumed, "to whack up something soon. Of course it's only a hope,

but I really think there's basis for it. This month, if we put through a big order we have now, we'll have our banner month."

"So glad to know it," Janet heard John mumble.

"I thought I'd tell you all this," her husband pursued, unabashed, "because you might be interested and—"

"I am," murmured John.

"No doubt some of you were worried because we began on such slim capital," Butler ventured in a manner that said that of course if there had been any such fears they could now be laughed away. "But—well—"

Not only did Janet's cheeks burn; every nerve in her body tingled, and the sting of her anger brought tears to her eyes. She wanted to hurl herself madly against the wall; her mental anguish was so acute that physical pain would have been a relief. She did not know which cut the deeper, the ghastly farcical cheapness of Butler's words and the utter falseness of his pose, or John's well-meant, laconic replies. In terror at what next might reach her, as she hid herself away, she clapped her hands over her ears. She was not sure that it was a relief when Martha's voice, sharp and clear, reached her.

"Come here, Butler; I've something to show you."

When Janet finally, with a jerk, opened the curtains and went back to her guests, she could not so much as glance at John. She was conscious that he was examining a picture in the shadowy dimness of the stairway.

Butler was bending with smiling interest over a ring on Martha's finger.

From then on the party collapsed hopelessly. Janet could not bring her dry lips to the conversation and each time that her eye unwittingly encountered Martha's or John's the fever on her cheeks burned afresh.

"And would you believe it," Mrs. Reynolds was declaring to Julian and the Dalrymple girls, "the waiter fetched his own son to watch him cut the duck, and the kid was as proud of the old man as if he were the first surgeon in the world."

"Ugh!" thought Janet, "how can I get through?" And just then Powell, quick to see the change in Janet, got to his feet.

"Lotta, don't begin another Broadway anecdote. It's time we got under way," he said; and the Dalrymple girls, with timid politeness, promptly followed. Butler and Janet turned from the door and it was an agonising moment as she faced the Tremonts. Butler still played the host, assiduously.

"Don't leave," he urged. "Can't we have a quiet talk? It isn't often we see you in the winter, John. How are your butterflies?"

Janet could stand no more. She fled to the kitchen on the pretext of speaking to the maid.

"Thanks, Butler, we mustn't," she heard Martha declare.

When she came into the dining-room again her sister was there. She was gathering her furs from the chair where she had laid them. Janet stopped to help her.

She was too puzzled, shamed, and angry for words, and she squeezed her eyes tight closed as she reflected that her sister, too, had heard and seen the entire sickening performance. The picture of it flashed to her again; the languid ease, the silly confidence of Butler's attitude as he hung over the bannister end, the slow drawl of the words, "We hope to whack up something soon"—Janet turned away, crimson.

It was several seconds before she felt that her sister's eyes were upon her. Somehow she met them. They were rich, dark, and penetrating in the half-light of the room.

"Don't mind! It was injured pride at being in trouble. He's a nice boy."

That was all she said.

Before Janet could comprehend this sudden, unexpected utterance, or before she was entirely conscious that those guileful, red lips had ceased moving, Mrs. Tremont had passed through the portières into the other room. It was as if a spirit had breathed the injunction into Janet's ear, and she had not fully collected herself when she heard Martha, in her usual mocking, patronising tone, saying:

"You did very well, Janet, with your buffet. It's an excellent way to manage."

John had reached the last button of his long coat and said his uncompromisingly formal farewell. Martha had a cordial handshake for Butler, but no kiss for Janet, and for this Janet was grateful.

Butler followed out to the steps of the machine.

Janet, left alone, sank down on the couch and covered her face with her hands. She could hear Butler's clear, strong tones in gay talk with her sister and brother-in-law. His cheerfulness, real or assumed, was an added offence to Janet. All of her earlier resentment came back upon her. The score against Butler was piling high—that furtive departure, the misery in which he had left her, those worse than empty, boasting words. Shame and anger set her lips tight and made flint of her eyes.

The door of the motor banged and the car got grindingly under way. Once more Butler shouted a farewell. She heard him scuffing his boots on the brick walk and then his rapid footfalls as he bounded toward the house. Janet sat erect, ready for the encounter, her hands folded in her lap.

"Dearest," cried Butler, as he came eagerly into the room. It was the first moment they had been alone since he had gone away. In five swift steps he crossed to her and caught her in his arms. Holding her very close, he pressed warm kisses on her forehead. Despite herself, the girl half-yielded, and it was with a gentle hand that she pushed him off.

"Why, Janet, what's wrong?" asked Butler in bewilderment. His big palms spread over her cheeks and he held her face up to him. She shook her head loose and sat down, confronting him.

"Why did you go West?" she demanded abruptly.

"Oh yes. I forgot that I hadn't told you. But why so serious?"

"It's been a serious time, Butler," she affirmed solemnly.

"How?"

"I've suffered and suffered horribly. You left me here to suffer."

"I did, dearest? Why, how?"

"How? How?" blazed Janet. "That's silly! You know how!"

He merely continued to stare at her.

"By stealing away without explaining anything to me," she supplied. "By just leaving me to think all sorts of things." Her voice threatened to break.

"But I didn't want to disturb you that morning," he pleaded. "You'd been up all night. When I left the house I wasn't sure I'd go West. It was for you—to spare you—to give you your rest."

"But the letter, Butler—the letter?" she reminded. "Not a word over the telephone. Nothing! Just that terrible letter."

"Oh, that!" rejoined Butler, with a half-guilty smile. "Yes, I know. But listen! I could have given you only a half-explanation over the telephone. I could have told you just enough to worry you, to leave you anxious and—"

"To leave me anxious!" she caught up hastily. "Why—I've been nearly mad!"

"Nearly mad?" he cried, his voice rising with incredulity. "What about?"

"About everything. The business—you—money."

"Money? Why money?" he asked, dropping down beside her.

"Oh, Butler," she exclaimed, brushing a hand toward him in disgust. "Why money? It *was* money; I know it was money. I could tell. It was in the whole thing—the very spirit of it. Of course I could tell. The minute your telegram came I was certain it was money. Every word, every act, everything, breathed money."

She sprang to her feet and walked up and down the floor in high agitation, striving to sort out her thoughts. Finally, from the perturbed processes of her mind, she brought forth with only a trace of questioning:

"It *was* money, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was money," acknowledged Butler quietly, studying his hands.

"Certainly it was!" shot back Janet, and then, wheeling upon him, fixed her eyes upon his lowered head. "Of course, Butler, it was money, and I've got it for you," she concluded.

He glanced up quickly. There was a dazed blank film of perplexity over his eyes. In that instant, as she looked down at him, so naïve, so surprised, so innocent, and so relieved, Janet's strong mother instinct rushed out. There was a boyishness about Butler that was half his charm—a boyishness which always seemed to challenge her strength.

"Yes, I've got it!" she reaffirmed comfortingly.

"Where?" he gasped, the lines of his face relaxing.

"Mother," she replied and turned away.

There was a long pause. Janet knew what it signified. Within Butler there was a struggle. Injured pride that his women folks should have come to his aid pressed hard upon gratitude and relief. That pride of Butler's, thought Janet—how persistently it raised its head. Finally he spoke.

"Janet, you're a wonder," was all he said.

The girl still kept her distance and paced the floor.

"Was the business in a very bad fix?" she asked.

"Not very," he told her. "It was just the financing of that big order that I told him about—the thing Harsen and I were discussing that night."

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Janet, with a sudden thought, and returned to the couch. "That reminds me. Uncle Charles wants to meet you and Harsen at your office tomorrow. He'll arrange about the money then."

"Very well," said Butler. He was still thoughtful. Presently Janet added casually:

"And he wants me there."

"You?" came from him sharply. "Why you?" he turned toward her.

"I don't know," she rejoined simply. "He just asked me to come. It's all right, isn't it? It doesn't make any difference, does it?"

Butler did not answer and it was his turn to pace the floor. Janet watched him and she could see his distress. But she could not understand it.

"What difference does it make?" she repeated.

"Oh, it's humiliating," flung off Butler.

"Humiliating? How?"

"Think of the position it puts me in before Harsen!" He paused and then said, a little angrily: "Does Winter believe I need a nurse?"

Janet now understood his feeling; again it was Butler's pride that tormented him; something akin to compassion prompted her reply. "Oh no, not that, dear. It's just some queer idea of his."

"It's queer, all right," said he, with bitterness. "I don't like it—it isn't fair."

"Well, what are we to do?" she asked. "Uncle Charles was very insistent."

"I had another plan," Butler declared by way of reply. "All the way back on the train I was thinking matters out. Perhaps my scheme would have been better. I don't like this idea of dragging women into business."

"What was your plan, Butler?" Janet asked kindly, a suspicion forming in her mind.

"Oh, to get John Tremont to help out."

It was on Janet's tongue to tell her husband that that plan would prove futile. The words seemed to check themselves. Her eyes were on him. He had paused by the round table near the other end of the room. His clean, soft profile showed against the light and she could see that it was pinched and strained with distress. She knew that look. His head was lowered and his shoulders, too, were down. His whole attitude struck fresh sympathy to her.

"I made a sort of beginning tonight," Butler pur-

sued in a low tone. "Sort of opened the subject up, you know. I think you were out of the room at the time. I tried to tell him about what we were doing and all that and lead into the subject that way."

He paused. Janet did not move. Viewed in that light, Butler's scourging utterances that evening, those vainglorious boasts which had reached her burning ears, seemed less to be condemned; certainly far more easily to be condoned. More than that, how could he have known the cruel farce he had been enacting? She glanced toward him again.

"I'll bet John wouldn't humiliate me by dragging you in," he declared, jerking his head. His tone showed how deep Charles Winter's cut had been, and it came to Janet, with a rush of emotion, how much deeper the cut would be if Butler learned the crushing story of her visit to the Tremonts and perceived in what a painfully ludicrous position he had stood that evening before Martha and John. "Don't mind. It's only injured pride at being in trouble. He's a nice boy." Those whispered words of her sister's vividly returned.

"Butler," she began, "I don't want you to go to John." Her chin was in her palm and her eyes on the floor. She heard him turn about.

"Why not?" Butler asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she said slowly. "Sometimes I think John's awfully hard."

"John? Hard?" he cried in surprise. "Why, I thought you had John enshrined as a near-saint. This is something new. What's happened?"

Janet kept silent. It was in her thoughts that John and Martha, far more than Butler, had been wilfully unkind; the sting of their cool refusal tortured her again. Butler was standing above her, but she did not raise her head.

"What's happened, Janet?" he urged. "Something's wrong! What have they done to you?"

Still she was thoughtful and she felt unhappiness creeping heavily over her, like a thick fog. All anger was gone. The moody silence continued. Butler sat down and drew her head to his shoulder.

"Dearest, you have had a hard time. I've been cruel," he whispered and she could feel his breath softly stirring on her hair. "I'm sorry, dearie. Now cheer up and tell me what's gone wrong with the Tremonts?"

She had yielded herself now completely to his comforting embrace. The warmth of their love was in his encircling arms. Janet closed her eyes.

"Nothing's gone wrong with the Tremonts," she murmured. "It's only what I've said. Maybe it's money that makes people hard, and, anyway, Mother's promised to help."

She turned her face up to kiss him and as their lips met a convincing sense came to her that she would spare her husband and his pride. Butler must never know of her visit to the Tremonts; must never suffer the biting humiliation of his hollow words to John. Just that one secret she would keep from her husband, for his sake and his sake alone.

CHAPTER VIII

JANET VISITS THE OFFICES

As Charles Winter had once pointed out to Janet, she lived in the comfortable assumption that Butler was inevitably destined for success and that with his success there would come to her that bright cluster of material benefits which were so vital to her scheme of life and happiness. This assumption, on Janet's part, rested in large measure on the facts of her environment.

"You were born into and brought up in the world that achieves," her friendly mentor had said, "but that does not mean that you will necessarily belong to that world. Don't forget that your father's friends, John Tremont's friends, the people you're getting to know in Tuckerton—successful men—are successful primarily, not because they belong to the stratum of success; they belong to the stratum of success because they have won out. You'd never know them if they were failures. Remember that, my dear young lady, when you are indulging in your delightful dreams."

But this made only a slight dent in Janet's armour of confidence, which was even more stoutly fortified by her estimate of Butler's powers. Never, not even when she was pleading with Martha and John to come to the relief of the newly formed enterprise, did it occur to

Janet to question her husband's abilities in the realm of affairs. His need of money presented itself to her as an unfortunate, unescapable development, and in her mind was in no way related to Butler's qualities.

Her pride in Butler was prodigious, and it thus happened that when she began to contemplate the prospect of attending the business conference to which Winter had summoned her, there was, in the back of her mind, a lively desire to be there. To the girl there was an element of adventure in a meeting held in an office with all the accoutrements of the game at hand. It would be an absolutely novel experience for her, and totally different from the informal talks, snatches only of which had ever reached her, which used to go on in her family home, and, latterly, in her own. She had always felt, and much more since her ride a few months past with Julian Powell, that there was romance in the shaping of great affairs, and in the clashing of men's wills; and here was an opportunity to experience, at first hand, the thrill of the business game. Moreover, she had a most lively curiosity to see Butler "in action," as it were. She wanted to watch him in his big dealings with others and have the delight of making comparisons, flattering to her husband, which she knew she could make upon such an occasion.

All that shadowed this prospect was Butler's attitude, his unconcealed resentment that Winter should have called for her presence at the meeting. Indeed, so acute seemed Butler's feeling that Janet at breakfast

the next morning asked if she should defy Mrs. Fielding's adviser and stay away.

"I've defied him before, you know," she laughed. Butler continued busy with his grapefruit for a long interval before he replied:

"No! I hate it, but we'd better not take the chance. Your mother has put things up to Winter and I suppose we've got to do what he says."

Nevertheless, as they set out together, Janet could sense strongly his irritation, and when they found a seat in the train Butler got behind his newspaper with a peevish frown and in gloomy silence.

The morning express scudded along, and its even running lulled Janet from consideration of her husband's mood. She began drawing, in the broad, sweeping lines of her imagination, a picture of a really formidable business conference, such as she believed she was about to witness. The picture, somehow, took the form of a gathering of stolid men, with heavy watch-chains, grouped around both sides of a very long, glistening table, all of them inhumanly solemn and firm-faced, as if desperate matters were before them. At the further end, more solemn, more firm-faced than any of the others, sat one, who obviously enough was the dominant figure. That, of course, in her conception, was Butler.

She was revelling in the picture as several small stations shot past. Details—side-whiskers on some of the confrères, shining ink-wells, a black-framed portrait in the rear-ground—were beginning to fill themselves in,

when it flashed over Janet that a carefully posed photograph of the President of the United States and his Cabinet, in session, was a pretentious model for a picture of a conference upon the affairs of Pierce & Harsen. She laughed, a soft, chuckling laugh, and pressed her mouth into her glove.

"What's the joke?" asked Butler, glancing at her with a scowl.

"Nothing, dear," she answered amiably, and patted his knee.

As he resumed his paper, she went back to her picture and began adjusting it to scale. She was sure, for one thing, that such a conference as she was about to attend would at least be formal, slow moving, and consume a great deal of time. Even if only three men were to participate it would have a dignified and solemn air. Carefully considered opinions would be gravely exchanged across a table of some kind and with much ceremonious deference. In thoroughly correct attitudes they would talk and ponder, ponder and talk, until, at last, with brows heavy with responsibility, a determination would be reached, and the meeting, throughout which Butler would have been crisp, incisive, controlling, would then adjourn with much respectful handshaking all round.

When they reached the office Butler led her straight to his room. He found a chair for her and without formality placed it by the window.

"Winter will be here soon," he said briefly, and crossing the floor to his desk against the opposite wall,

turned to a stack of accumulated mail. Janet watched him rip open briskly one envelope after another, glance quickly at the letter or circular and consign it, with prompt decision, either to the wastebasket at his side or to the wire tray in front of him. She admired the certainty and despatch of his movements.

It was precisely ten when Winter appeared in the doorway. Seeing Janet, he removed his hat, smiled, but did not come over to shake hands. Butler shoved away his mail and got quickly to his feet.

"Oh, Mr. Winter, come in," he said, with prompt cordiality which Janet knew was forced. He dragged a chair close to his desk. Winter, without words, sat down and ignoring, with complete indifference, something which Butler obviously had in mind to say, immediately asked:

"Harsen here?"

"I'll get him," returned the other, and hurried from the room.

"Sharp morning, Janet," remarked Charles Winter cordially. "I walked down."

Janet observed that he had not troubled to remove his overcoat. His derby hat he held in his lap. His entire manner was that of a man who had come to stay only a moment. Janet was about to suggest that he take off his coat when Butler returned, Harsen following. Her husband's partner bowed as gracefully as he could, and for Butler's sake she was glad that his face showed not the faintest trace of surprise that she should be there by the window. After his bow to her, he jerked

a nod to Winter, and without more ceremony leaned against the wall beside the desk. Butler was in his revolving chair, which he had pushed back, and kept tapping his upraised knee with a pencil.

"I understand your concern is in trouble," began Winter without a second's delay.

Janet then took in the fact that the great business conference had actually begun. Nobody was formal. Nobody was grave. There was no table; there was no air of deliberation; the three men were in the easiest possible attitudes, one of them had not even troubled to sit down, and Butler alone seemed to suggest that he expected to be in the room five minutes hence. Janet rested her weight on the arm of her chair and turned her somewhat bewildered scrutiny rapidly from one to the other.

"In trouble?" rejoined Harsen, facing Winter guiltlessly after the latter had spoken. "If so, I don't know it."

"How about that, Pierce?" came quickly from the lawyer, a little wearily, after the manner of a man making perfectly established, and therefore tiresome, preliminary moves in a game of checkers.

"Well, you see it is this way—" began Butler uncertainly. He was tapping his knee more rapidly and gave an embarrassed hitch to his chair as he started to make his explanation. Winter cut in:

"You either are or you aren't. As I understand it, you have been seeking additional capital, or perhaps a loan, because the concern is in immediate straits. Ap-

plication has been made to one of my clients with whom you desire to make an arrangement. Is that correct? "

"Ye-es, in a way," replied Butler dubiously. Harsen was watching his partner closely.

"Very good," Winter speedily and incisively proceeded. "Are you seeking money to be invested in your capital stock, or are you seeking a loan? "

"Either," declared Butler, with a false note of certainty.

"I think Mr. Pierce means he's seeking a loan," put in Harsen, and then to Butler, "If you are not prepared to sell your stock, you can't be seeking an investor. As I understand it, you won't sell. Therefore, what you are after is a loan." There was rare suavity in Harsen's manner, and Winter shifted his glance sharply toward him.

"Yes, that's right, a loan," amended Butler, flushing.

"A loan, then," resumed the lawyer, as if gathering the reins again into his hands.

"What for? "

"For the business," said Butler.

"But I understand from Harsen that the business is not in trouble," snapped back Winter impatiently. The two men were regarding Butler. There was a pause. The young man moistened his lips and was about to speak, when, in firm tones, Harsen addressed himself to the lawyer.

"The concern is all right, Mr. Winter. We're a little cramped for capital, but I've offered a clear way

out." Then, speaking to Butler: "Is that correct, Pierce?"

Janet was mystified and lost. She distinctly understood that the business was in difficulties; for that reason she had appealed to the Tremonts and her mother. Butler had admitted as much to her the night before; in fact, if she remembered correctly, distinctly said so. And yet, here was Harsen in the clear, ringing voice of certainty, declaring that the business was not in distress. She strained to focus her mind for a closer attention.

"Well, you see, it's like this," faltered Butler. "We have a chance to sell a good order of a new kind of paper that will bring us money sufficient to keep us going for quite a while. It's a paper that's used for high-grade illustrations, you know; for photographs and that sort of thing. We've never dealt in it before. We've got to meet competition at every point and can't afford to neglect—" He was floundering.

"Here's the case, Mr. Winter," shot out Harsen, surefooted in every syllable. "We're loaded with a lot of paper which Pierce thought, when the concern was formed, he could sell and now finds he can't. None of this supply is the illustration or coated paper, for which we have the big order. Our capital is tied up, we have no funds to buy the new stuff. Pyncheon & Styce will sell us on credit the paper needed to fill the order, but they insist that I, personally, endorse the notes."

He paused. "Well?" asked Winter.

"Well, I'm willing to do it," assented Harsen—"perfectly willing—if I get my price."

"What's your price?"

Janet was watching Butler, whose eyes were fixed, in clear distress, upon Harsen's face. There was no hesitation in Harsen's reply.

"Control," he said, and there was silence. Winter was regarding Harsen sidewise, with an odd grin.

The situation was still a muddle to Janet. She had not been able to comprehend the rapid explanation nor did that apparently fateful word "control" connote anything very definite to her understanding. What most impressed the girl was the sledge-hammer, crushing mastery of Harsen's tones. There had been in them that same domineering, not-to-be-altered note of finality which she had detected before; and in glaring contrast to the utterance of Butler's words, a sort of raucous brutality. It did occur to her vaguely that Butler ought to assert himself more vigorously. But she had small time for analysis. The talk was shooting swiftly ahead.

"Control," at last repeated the lawyer. "What does that represent?"

"Pierce owns sixty per cent. I own forty per cent. I want eleven per cent. for endorsement."

"You put up no original capital?" asked the lawyer, raising his eyebrows.

"Brains and experience."

"Close deal, Harsen," rejoined Winter, with a hard, wry smile.

"Pierce accepted it," was the rejoinder. Butler's eyes were on the floor.

"What did he get in exchange?"

"A fat salary," returned Harsen, with a grin.

"How much money is now needed?" Winter queried.

"Twenty-five per cent. of the original outlay."

The colloquy was sharp, certain, rapid, like musket fire, and every shot hit. There was no faltering or missing of the mark. Janet was fascinated by the speed of the thing.

"Those estimates of Pierce's—" began Winter, when Butler, looking up, interrupted a trifle angrily:

"Which he accepted!"

The lawyer frowned and went on:

"—of what he could sell, was the primary cause of tying up the capital, you say?"

"Yes."

"Did you approve of tying capital to that extent?"

"Pierce said he could sell the paper," returned Harsen, sly amusement in his eye.

"And you took his word for it?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"He was president."

"I see," said Winter, with a nod, and after a pause he resumed:

"Why don't you liquidate, sell out the supply on hand at the best prices you can get?"

"We'd have to make a ruinous sacrifice," contributed Butler.

"The objection to that plan is this, Mr. Winter," spoke up Harsen, without regard to Butler's remark. "We would not realise its worth on a sudden sale. When we had paid for this new order we would not have sufficient left to keep up for long with our fixed running expenses." He and the lawyer studied each other.

"Of what do they consist chiefly?" inquired Winter.

"Mostly salaries."

"Reduce them."

"I'm willing," immediately declared Harsen.

Both turned toward Butler. There was a hunted look in his eyes and a silence in the room, the keen import of which Janet could not miss. She felt that she, too, in some manner that she could not define, was involved in Butler's obvious humiliation. But how matters had taken this sudden turn she did not know. She was on the point of speaking, when Winter broke the pause.

"Well, Butler, will you reduce?"

Almost in a whisper came the reply:

"We can't."

Straining with a painful smile, Butler beat nervously with his pencil. Winter reflectively examined the ceiling and tapped upon the crown of his hat. Harsen studied his boots and jingled his keys.

Janet, never swerving her glance from Butler's face, was leaning forward on the arm of her chair and trying to adjust her staggered senses. Matters had not fallen out at all as she had expected. There had been nothing

deliberate about the meeting, nothing impressive nor particularly dignified.

In a swift cross-exchange of talk, a strange riddle had been created. What stood out most clearly was that Butler, far from looming up as a vigorous and dominant figure in this discussion of the affairs of his own concern, was now the suffering object of a strained and embarrassed silence. In some unaccountable way he had in the brief space of a few moments been turned topsy-turvy to a position which seemed to hold neither dignity nor respect. The girl was too amazed to do more than stare at her husband as he fairly writhed in his chair.

"Briefly, then," Winter was saying dispassionately, and very distinctly, with half a glance at Janet, "a profitable new order has been secured. You can't finance it with your present capital. This has come about because your initial capital is tied up in unsalable paper on hand. Harsen's offer is to lend his personal credit for this needed financing. For this he demands eleven per cent. of the stock, thereby removing control of the business from Pierce's hands and taking it into his own."

He paused and held out his open hand in an inquiring gesture and looked from one partner to the other before he asked: "Is that correct?"

"Exactly," exclaimed Harsen, and added, with a shake of his head; "you state a business proposition wonderfully, Mr. Winter."

"None of that, please," returned Winter sharply, and fixed him for a second with a determined eye.

Harsen, unabashed, grinned. "All right," he rejoined cheerfully, "but it's the fact." The lawyer ignored him and turned to Butler.

"Was my statement correct?" he asked considerately.

"Yes, I suppose so," assented Butler weakly, "only I think Harsen should contribute his endorsement without making terms. We're partners; we're in business together."

"That's just it," Harsen snapped him up. "We're in business, and that's business."

"One kind of business," amended Winter, with a quiet nod at Harsen.

"As you like," said the partner indifferently. Then, still jingling his keys and looking entirely beyond the group in the room, he went on, as if talking to himself:

"I put in no capital. That was our deal. It was made, finished, done, four months ago. When Pierce asks me to lend my credit he is asking me to do more than my bargain with him called for. I'll do it, but I must be paid."

The full measure of the man's determination had been in his words. They were spoken quietly, but with their accustomed note of paralysing force—that note which always gave Janet a shuddering sense of weakness; of the utter futility of opposition; of powerlessness against his will; that note, which, she suddenly

told herself, Butler never brought to command. Winter was resuming the talk.

"Really, my boy," he was saying to Butler with paternal kindness, "what you want this money for is not to save the concern, but yourself. I guess that's the cold fact, isn't it? You see, the business, as a business, can swim through without it. But you, as an individual, can't. Doesn't it resolve itself into the very simple proposition that you, Butler Pierce, individually and personally, have been caught in a pretty serious difficulty?"

The simple fact, thus stated, crashed to Janet's brain, sweeping aside thoughts of Harsen's manner, of Butler's lack of assertiveness, of all else save that one outstanding fact.

"Yes, I suppose so," she heard Butler murmur almost inaudibly. It was the first really tangible idea concerning the situation which had penetrated to the girl. They might talk of stock endorsement, percentages, control, capital—these words had little or no vitality for her. But "Butler Pierce—in serious difficulty"—she could understand that, and it struck terror to her heart. Before she could check herself there slipped from her lips, already quivering, an exclamation of horror.

"Oh!" she cried. "Not the business? Just Butler?" She was on her feet before them, her hands clenched, searching desperately in one face after the other. The suddenness of it was breathtaking. Butler half rose, his face twisted in his distress. Janet's panic-

stricken, fierce-inquiring glance finally fixed itself upon Winter.

"It's like this," the lawyer began to explain in mollifying tones. Butler dropped back into his chair and turned from Harsen's smile. "The price of Mr. Harsen's endorsement is that Butler loses control of the business."

"Butler's control?" she echoed, large-eyed and bewildered as a child.

"Exactly," added Winter. "And that means, I imagine, the overthrow of this beautiful little edifice of yours."

She stood staring and trembling before him.

"You might as well grasp the fact now, Janet," the lawyer pursued. "In due course everything you've got here will probably be gone."

"Gone?" she echoed in a shrill key, and could say no more as she struggled to give the idea meaning in her mind. The blows had fallen too fast. First it was that Butler, and not the business, was in peril. That raised a swarm of fleeting questions. But she ignored them; they were of no consequence just now. Then it was that she had suddenly been told that the chief supporting beam of her scheme of life threatened to crash down. Without warning, she had found herself gazing into a pit of ruin, holding for Butler and for her, she knew not what fates.

"But Mother? Mother will help!" she gasped.

Winter studied her. His lips set firmly, and then very slowly he said:

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"What's that you say? Perfectly futile?" the mother was repeating

"Janet, I'm sorry, but I shall be compelled to urge her most strongly not to do so."

"But she promised."

"Without knowing the facts."

"But she will!" stamped Janet and reached swiftly for her muff in the seat of the chair. Her face was white and tense as she made for the door. Winter tried to raise a detaining arm. With a twist of her lithe body she eluded it. Harsen, his smile of insolence gone, took a startled step back. She shot into the outer room and dodged around the table.

"Janet," came in choking appeal from Butler.

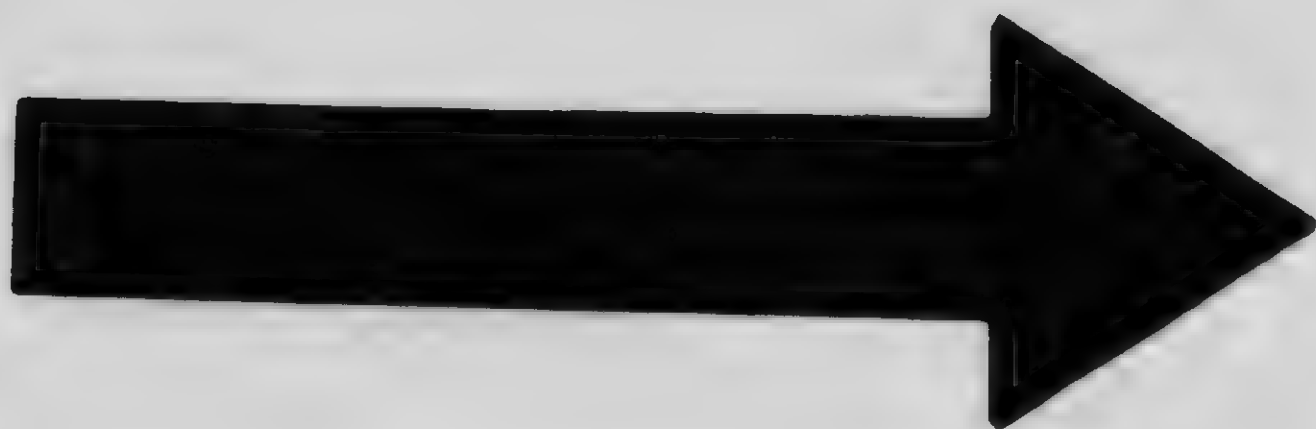
She did not heed. The door of the office closed on its springs behind her, and she ran down the echoing hall. Luck was with her. An elevator answered to her very ring. A few seconds more and she was being spun through whirling doors to the pavement. A taxicab, its flag up, was bumping past. She hailed it. The machine sped off, shooting with perilous swerves through the traffic maze. When, like a wild animal, she burst into her mother's apartment, she was breathless and agitation strained in every glance.

Mrs. Fielding was at the telephone. Instantly Janet knew that it was Charles Winter who was at the other end of the wire.

"What's that you say? Perfectly futile?" her mother was repeating.

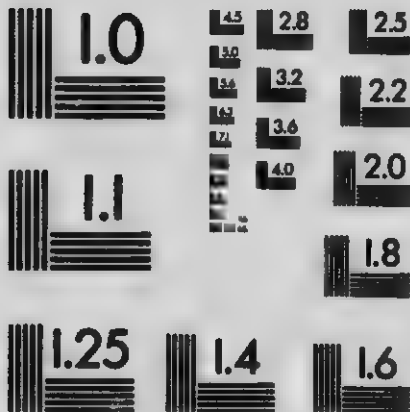
"Stop, Mother! Stop!" cried the girl, clutching tight upon Mrs. Fielding's fleshy arm.

The older woman lowered the receiver from her ear



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and put her hand over the mouthpiece. She turned about and faced Janet's panic-stricken gaze.

"My poor, poor girl," she exclaimed, seeming at the moment to crumble at the shoulders and sink beneath a weight of distress.

"It's not I, Mother," cried Janet. "It's not Butler. It's everything!"

Her grip loosened. With a handkerchief at her lips she made several paces behind Mrs. Fielding's chair.

"No matter what Uncle Charles says," the girl declared in a harsh whisper, "you must not, Mother—you cannot—fail me now."

CHAPTER IX

"THE MATTER WITH YOU PEOPLE"

Mrs. FIELDING did come to Janet's aid. The girl's desperate appeal swept aside all other considerations. The older woman, after a moment's consideration, turned back again to the telephone.

"Charles," she said, rather breathlessly, "Janet is here—yes, just a moment ago—you should never have tried it, Charles; it has worked cruelly—yes, as much in the dark as ever. She didn't in the least understand."

"Oh, tell him, Mother; tell him!" pleaded Janet frantically. "How can you talk with this hanging over us. It may be a matter of minutes. Tell him!"

Mrs. Fielding looked up and nodded. "Well, never mind the facts now, Charles. Just arrange everything—Yes, as you think best—No, please don't try to tell me now; later, please—No, I have no choice. It must be done—Yes, I am alarmed, very alarmed, about her. That's why I can't talk now. Good-bye—Yes, the full amount."

Mrs. Fielding hung up the receiver and faced her daughter.

"Is it fixed? Is it all arranged?" Janet demanded,

searching eyes upon her mother. For a long moment Mrs. Fielding regarded her.

"Yes, my precious, it is fixed; it is all arranged. It's over now."

As she brought out the words she got to her feet and held out both her arms. With a sudden impulsive step Janet slipped within the open embrace and her own slim arms went about her mother's neck. The girl then had no emotion except that heaven-sent calm which for an instant follows the cessation of pain. Presently the large form to which she clung began to shake with grief.

"Yes, darling, it's over now; it's over, now," sobbed the woman. "Oh, my baby, my little girl!"

Her mother's tears mingled with her own. Convulsive sobs hindered words. All the uncertainties, humiliation, and terrors which had been damming up within Janet since the night when she had trembled with cold and dread in the hallway of her pretty home swept her in a torrent of emotion. It was a long moment before the flood passed.

"This won't do," at length exclaimed Janet with decision and broke away.

"No, you're quite right. We can't give in like that!" assented Mrs. Fielding, moving clumsily to the window, where, trying to collect herself, she gazed out.

"Don't let's talk about it any more," Janet's mother finally said. "The money's arranged for. Charles will tell me all I need to know."

It was a good half hour before Janet's vigor and

calm returned. At length, however, she began to take stock of her immediate situation. Memories of the meeting returned. There were questions which she felt she must put to Butler without delay. Most particularly, there was the question of why he had led her to the belief that the money was needed for the business and not for himself. Shortly she got up and walked to the telephone.

Butler responded. "Is everything all right?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes, everything is all right, now," came back from Butler. Humiliation was in every syllable. "I don't know how I'm going to thank you," he added.

"Don't thank me. Thank Mother," adjured the girl, and paused before she said with firmness: "Butler, I wish you would meet me for luncheon."

"Very well," he agreed. There was no eagerness in the reply. "Taratan's at one."

This gave Janet an hour. Before she confronted her husband she wanted to think. Therefore, she soon left her mother and setting off at a brisk walk, endeavoured to get order into her thoughts. She was an engaging picture of a girl as she turned out of the quiet, unpretentious side street upon which Mrs. Fielding lived and began her spirited progress down the sunshiny cheerfulness of Madison Avenue. A round black hat, banded with grey fur; a grey muff which she held in one hand and swung as she walked; a snug collar which seemed to emphasise the dignified set of her head—all played up to the trimness of her

blue tailored suit. She was conscious, as she stepped along, of the eyes that appraised her.

But for what was happening around her she had now only a fleeting concern. She was busy recreating the events of the morning; Butler's embarrassed tapping of his knee with his pencil, his almost continuously downcast gaze, the bewildered look on his face when a rapid question from Winter ' ' been shot to him, the impotency of his frown when he tried to speak up for his case, the helplessness that had been in his eyes in that stinging moment when he had been forced to declare that his salary could not be reduced. A score of attitudes, as many odds and ends of expressions, presented themselves. Together they did not make up a very heroic study. There was, indeed, only the dimmest resemblance to the impressive canvas her eager and idealising imagination had beforehand created.

Contrasts followed; the certainty of Winter's every gesture and turn; the sturdiness and driving force of Harsen; Butler's distressed shuffling about. She remembered how cool and stern the lawyer's tones had seemed. Harsen, when he had spoken, had been deep-throated, dominating, sure, but Butler—timid, halting, hesitating! His attempt to state the situation which had brought the meeting about had been, she reflected, an inglorious performance. Irresistibly, fragments of Harsen's summary arose, with their challenge. Try as she might, she could summon up no words of Butler's in that quick, incisive fire of talk which had so won her fancy at the time. The girl

found herself facing the traffic jumble at Forty-second Street with the reflection that anyway Butler had been polite.

Janet was not precisely contemptuous. But she was amazed nearly to the point of incredulity. Had she had any less veritable proof than the testimony of her own eyes and ears she could not have accepted the fact of the miserably inadequate figure her husband had presented. And her own pride was suffering. With a ruthless and unusual frankness, she told herself that her husband, whom every instinct had always made her regard as a giant, had, in this one crisis at least, shown himself little more than a pigmy; and, worse, a pigmy making an undignified struggle to appear of imposing stature. Memory of the performance sickened her and she pressed tight her lips in a flash of anger.

But as she turned into Fifth Avenue, sparkling with life, the insistent loyalty of her nature came to her rescue. Butler had never lied to her, such baseness was not in him; and he would explain, if only once they were face to face, that strange misrepresentation of his. He would do more; he would come to her with a clean, firm statement of the causes which had placed him in such an unhappy light at the conference. There was some substantial excuse; there must be! She sharpened her pace to the restaurant, impatient for the word that would explode her doubts and enable her to reconstruct the picture she had had until a few hours ago of her husband as a man of affairs.

Running up the steps of Tartaran's, it occurred to

Janet that it was there, five months earlier, that she had met Butler to turn over to him the crisp, crackling bills of her newly converted legacy. As she came into the lobby, peering around for sight of her husband, she recalled vividly the high elation of that other meeting. Doubts, suspicion, humiliation had never touched her then. A contemplation of the contrast would not, she knew, relieve her mood nor help her in her struggle to keep faith in her husband. She banished the thought while still threading her way around the elbows of the crowd.

Butler had not arrived. She looked at the watch on her wrist. It was one o'clock. She sat down to wait. As she did so she realised that she was tired—tired and lax, like an eased line. She longed to have her questionings cleared away, her battered pride soothed, her measureless faith in Butler restored. Her husband alone could bring the healing words, and with that faint, persistent tremble to lips she kept anxious, eager eyes on the doorway.

Ten minutes passed. Butler did not appear. She got up and wandered out through the entrance to the steps. Turning toward the corner she saw him in his long, large-buttoned coat. He was making for the restaurant, but he was not alone. At his side walked Mrs. Reynolds, laughing up to him, and with them was Julian Powell, a trifle detached and swinging his cane. Butler's head was bent to hear what Lotta Reynolds was saying and he did not see Janet waiting at the top of the steps.

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Instantly the girl read her husband's mind. He had been afraid, anyhow unwilling, to face her alone. Pride had given him dread of the questions he believed he would have to answer, of the explanations he would have to make. To summon Julian and Lotta had been his stratagem to delay Janet's queries. With a sudden movement and before Butler had glanced up, she retreated through the doorway. Choking with disappointment and anger, she fled to a little side waiting-room.

Despite herself, tears crowded over her lashes and moistened her veil. She drew it up over the brim of her hat and searched for her handkerchief. There was an inconspicuous chair in one corner. She crossed over and sat down. A keen-eyed maid, from the other side of the room, threw a look at her. Women, crowding with powder puffs to mirrors, watched her in the glass. Janet was in a tingling rage which only a stormy outlet or abandoned grief could relieve. She bit at her lip, wondering what to do. Her whole desire was to be alone with Butler. A luncheon party, gay with laughter, was the last call of her weary and distressed mind. Her tired nerves rebelled at the prospect and on an impulse she determined to flee, to escape through the crush in the lobby to the street.

She got up, wiping her eyes, and moved, blinking, toward the door. A hand seized her arm and spun her about. She was face to face with Lotta Reynolds.

"And what merry jest is choking you to death?" smiled Janet's friend. The girl did not know whether

she was glad or not that she had been caught. Loneliness just then had terrors as real as her dread of the hilarity which Butler sought to force upon her. There had been an undertone of seriousness in Mrs. Reynolds' words which Janet had not missed. With an effort she took herself in hand and replied hastily:

"Oh, nothing—nothing." She had been unable to control a slight quaver in her voice.

"So I see," observed the other, nodding brightly as, with elbows up, she fingered at her hatpins.

"I was just going out," Janet managed to declare.

"Well, they're both there. Grand little notion of your husband's, wasn't it? Oh, that husband of yours, my dear young lady, has some of the nicest notions. Wait! Don't go out like that. Come here and let me doctor you up."

She drew the girl to a mirror. With a few quick dabs she repaired the worst of the tear stains.

"There!" she pronounced. "Cry all you want, but never let men catch you. A second now and I'll be ready. Great little place to cry—this room. I believe if ever I wanted a good cry I'd head straight for it."

"You never cry, do you?" brought out Janet mechanically, because it was all that she could say.

"Me?" cried Mrs. Reynolds, as she pulled down her mouth and, leaning forward, powdered her thin, straight nose. "Why, child, you must really see me cry sometimes. I'm perfectly wonderful, I assure you. You're a mere novice."

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"I don't cry often; only when I am tired," put in Janet. She wished her explanation was not so lame and wondered how many women would have spared her inquiries as Lotta had done.

They found Butler and Julian in the lobby. As Janet approached, Butler, the taller and chunkier of the two, stood with his back toward her. Julian, so much more precise of line, caught sight of her over Butler's shoulder. She saw in one glance, as he was presenting himself with a graceful bow before her, that he had read her unhappiness.

Butler swung about. He tried to smile, but the effort to Janet was mirthless and painful. Her conviction that he was not steeled to be alone with her was confirmed.

"Well, Janet," he said, with a self-conscious laugh and fidgeting at his necktie, "don't you think this is a nice party? Julian and I arranged it. Julian happened to call me up and when he said he was lunching with Lotta Reynolds it seemed too good a chance for us all to miss."

"Yes, Butler," returned Janet, lifting injured eyes to him and speaking soberly, "it's nice to see Julian and Mrs. Reynolds." If he had observed that she had been crying he did not show it. He turned toward Lotta Reynolds.

"My! how you do everlastingly belong to the picture here," he observed enthusiastically and taking a step back to admire her. The words caught Janet's attention. Mrs. Reynolds was indeed of the Tartar type;

the folds of her mauve dress omitted none of the arts of lure.

"Me? How?" Lotta asked.

"Oh, gay, spirited, cheerful—" He waved his hand as if more might be said.

"Naughty, you mean," cut in Mrs. Reynolds, with a laugh, and they all moved toward the dining-room door.

Julian, who seemed to assume command of the party, led the way, Janet at his side. When they were seated and Powell had ordered, she once again felt his calm scrutiny upon her. She kept her face averted. Presently she knew he had swung that level, steady glance of his upon Butler. Janet looked at her husband. He was biting nervously at his cheek and pretending the closest attention to words of Mrs. Reynolds. His unreality turned Janet away.

The room was crowded. Lively pleasure seemed at every hand. At the tables round about were vivacious, gesticulating groups; there was a quickening in the tune which the palm-hidden orchestra beat out; between chairs, hurrying, bowing, smiling waiters dodged nimbly. The girl's mood deepened and she viewed the scene dully and resentfully.

The luncheon was spiritless. Butler's sham gaiety was a load equal to Janet's troubled mind. Powell was thoughtful and it was with an abstracted air that he nodded when silver-crowned dishes were brought to his elbow. Only Lotta Reynolds seemed to soar, like some bright feathered bird, above the lowering gloom of the

meal. Every now and ag'in Janet felt the woman's solicitous gaze pass over her; the episode of the dressing-room had not been forgotten.

"Mrs. Pierce," Lotta suddenly declared, bringing down a hand, exquisitely graceful and olive-skinned, upon Janet's arm, "I've a plan!"

"Yes?" came from the girl, mustering a feeble smile.

"Let's make Julian give a party," she flashed, with high good humour. The audacity of such a suggestion struck Janet. In her social order the part of host was not unblushingly thrust upon a man. Mrs. Reynolds, however, had put forth the idea with a naturalness and confidence that bespoke no such hesitancy.

"Why, I thought you said that Julian could never get you to any more of his parties," reminded Janet.

"Well, he can't. But I'll come this once if you and your husband will. How about it, Julian? How about it, Mr.—Mr.—oh, Mr. Butler?" she finished merrily and turned toward Janet with a friendly wink.

"At your service, Lotta," grinned Julian. "Get your crowd. Cook up your program. All I stipulate is that I don't have to sit through 'The Kissing Girl' for the ninth time."

"We'll let you out of that," said Mrs. Reynolds. "Won't we, Mrs. Pierce? And now when will we have it?"

"Tonight."

It was Butler who had spoken and his eyes were fixed across the room. Janet's lips closed in a white

line. She turned a glance, straight and hard as a steel probe, upon her husband. His smile was more painful than ever.

"See how quickly we take up your invitation," he said to Julian.

"Now, that's the spirit!" chirped Mrs. Reynolds. "No bickering around for a month so that when the time does come we'll all be wanting to do something else. Speak up, Julian, and a customer's dinner or a society revel are barred as excuses!"

"I'll go you one better," returned Powell, with quiet amusement. "If you don't have your party tonight you can't have it at all."

"Settled!" pronounced Mrs. Reynolds, bringing her small fist to the table.

Janet's eyes had not left Butler's face. The cruelty of this added blow had left her dumb. It was a disgraceful reward for all that she had given and endured. And the futility of his plan! He must know that with all his squirming he could not gain many hours; that his pride would inevitably have to endure her reckoning. His fatuousness disgusted her; she was wounded, dismayed, and angry. Powell was watching her. She dropped her glance.

"No," she said quietly, turning over a spoon; "I'm afraid not tonight."

"Oh, come now, Janet. We've nothing on," spoke up Butler.

"I have," returned the girl, and there was a strained silence around the table.

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"What?" asked Butler, raising his brows in false innocence and with obvious effort allowing his eyes to meet hers. Janet's wrath was mounting; she determined to spare him no more.

"To talk to you; to go over matters with you," she answered firmly.

"What matters, dear?" came back from Butler, with a mock good nature, as if he were humouring a child.

"I think you know!"

Her husband's gaze fell. Julian moved restlessly. Mrs. Reynolds, smiling and detached, picked bread-crumbs. Janet continued to fix her husband with her indignant stare. Powell broke the tension.

"Do you know what is the matter with you people?"

He was addressing himself directly to Butler and Janet. Every turn of his head and gesture left Lotta Reynolds out. Janet was barely able to hold herself in her chair and she felt her fingers tighten involuntarily upon the arm rests. She realised that any sort of current of affection and interest between Butler and herself had been broken through the entire meal. But that this was so glaringly patent to others surprised her. She had believed that no senses but theirs could have detected the tiny shafts shooting back and forth—or the absence of the scores of small secret, half-conscious signals which only a husband and his wife can exchange. Mortification shamed her cheeks to crimson.

Julian Powell had paused with the perfect assurance of a man who knows to an infinitesimal point what he

is about. Janet discovered his eyes upon her and more burning colour swept into her face. Butler, aghast and with lax lips, was regarding his friend. Mrs. Reynolds, quizzically and leisurely, examined her long, marvellously clipped nails. As Julian proceeded, she reached to the centre of the table for a cigarette.

"The trouble is you live in the country," affirmed their friend. "And any two people who try to live together through the winter in a windswept house on top of a cold hill are sooner or later going—to—going to—well, bump—that is, if they keep it up."

Butler also reached for a cigarette. He lit it, shot out two bolts of smoke and crumpled it to a smudged and twisted heap on his plate. Janet, with hot emotions, bit at her lip.

"Why, what can you mean, Julian?" she asked, forcing herself to some control.

"I mean you!" he nodded, his self-contained smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Me?" she questioned, and betrayed herself with, "Us?"

"Yes,—you and Butler," Powell affirmed.

"Julian, you're outrageous," cut in Mrs. Reynolds, with an impatient shake of her head. "You and I couldn't do the country in the winter, but that's because we're pagans and gross materialists. But the Pierces are different. They're regular people, you know—my prize matrimonial bet." She turned toward Janet, two hair-like threads of grey smoke streaking from her delicate nostrils.

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"Are we? That's nice," Janet managed to say, with a grateful look.

Julian continued speaking. Janet listened, as if a dentist's burr was grinding at a sensitive tooth.

"Well, they are a good bet," he said, "but when you have a sure thing why not nurse it along? Now, the one way not to nurse this particular sure thing is to keep it in snow-bound solitude for three or four months running. What it needs is air, and I propose to give it air."

"He means champagne," grinned Mrs. Reynolds in an aside to Butler, whose face thereupon lost a little of the tautness it had had.

"Well, some of that," deliberately continued Powell. "But most of all, you people must get something new to talk about. You can't forever talk about babies, busted water-pipes, and drafty furnaces, can you, Butler?" Janet saw Butler struggle to reply. "Now tonight I'm going to give you something that will keep you talking for one evening, at least. I'm not going to let you escape. Lotta will rig you out with something, Janet, so you needn't chase to the country. Butler, my stuff fits you. He and I will call for you at Lotta's at seven."

With that he reached for the check, scrawled his name on the back, tossed a dollar on the small silver tray and scraped back his chair.

"All settled, Janet," he declared, bringing his hand to knee with finality and smiling at her.

Janet kept her eyes lowered because she could not

face him. The combat within her was strong. Of one thing she was certain, that Butler should not win the cheap and disgraceful victory he had planned. Equally certain was she that she would not admit that there was any blight upon the escutcheon, so untarnished till less than a week ago, of her married life. It would be beyond her to acknowledge a flaw in the much-vaunted glory of her home happiness.

"This parental interest of yours, Julian, is more than kind and charming," she said, sending him a well-simulated smile. "But don't you just a trifle miss the point? You see, I had a long talk with Mother this morning and there are matters which I want Butler to know of right away. Being a working man, he'll probably be busy all afternoon and tonight will be the best chance I can get. Don't you see? There is nothing more to it. No dark secrets, Julian, in the wind-swept house on the top of the hill."

She concluded with a brave laugh which took in Mrs. Reynolds. Lotta lifted a sudden admiring glance to her. When Janet had finished Powell watched her curiously for a brief space.

"Oh, well," he observed, "I guess that's easy. Butler will give you the afternoon."

Janet looked with cool inquiry to her husband. "Why, certainly," Butler made haste to say. "If that's all that blocks the party, there's no trouble at all. I didn't understand."

"But now you do!" thought the girl, still dry-throated and sore.

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"Good," brought forth Mrs. Reynolds briskly.
"We're fixed."

"We're fixed," chimed in Powell and got to his feet.

Butler laughed and Janet tried to, and they all trailed from the room. In the lobby details were arranged; Janet was to go to Mrs. Reynolds' apartment at five; Butler, at about the same time, to Powell's. The group dispersed. Julian dived into the telephone booth in quest of theatre seats; Lotta set off on foot to shop.

Janet was left on the uppermost step of the restaurant, with her husband, alone.

CHAPTER X

TEA WITH LOTTA

SHE did not know just how to begin; an overpowering sense of how much there was to say numbed her. The task seemed stupendous. Moreover, the anger and mortification of a few moments before had left her thoughts in disarray. As she strove to set her ideas in order, Janet could feel the tenseness of Butler's emotion. Beset with shame and a realisation of guilt, he was hardening himself, with clenched teeth and hunched-up shoulders, for the impending issue. It was he who broke the strained silence.

"Shall we walk?" he asked in a voice that was oppressively quiet and subdued. They quit the restaurant steps and the girl cut in immediately with her most tangible query—why had he led her to believe that it was for the business that the money had been required?

"You should have told me that it was for yourself—to save you!" she concluded soberly.

"You don't think I lied, do you?" he demanded, with harshness.

"No-o; but it wasn't to finance a paper order, was it?"

"Yes,—after a fashion," returned Butler, scowling.

"Why, no! Butler, no!" she corrected impatiently.

They paused to make a street crossing. Comfortably ensconced women, with disdainful eyes, shot past in the warm seclusion of limousines. Butler's contention seemed absurd.

"Why, no! Butler, no!" she resumed when they had reached the black slushiness of the other curb. "Uncle Charles distinctly said that the money was for you, 'individually and personally.' I remember those words."

Janet could feel, as sharply as if it had been herself, the anger of Butler's fagot-like pride. She glanced up at his contracted eyes and set lips. In his struggle for control he unconsciously quickened the pace.

"It's all just a matter of stating it," he succeeded at last in bringing out in a dry tone.

"Very good. Why, then, didn't you state it to me that way?"

"And why did you make a fool of yourself—such a fool of me?" he burst forth abruptly and with hot impatience, as if the question, long stifled, had leaped from him.

He had stopped short, wheeled about, and was facing her, his brows narrowed with feeling. There was a look of blackness about him that was terrifying, and Janet recoiled half a step. She was about to blaze a reply, but caught herself. There was an instant during which in rigid attitudes they confronted each other. And then, by a common impulse, they both relaxed and with unspoken agreement retreated quietly and with as much matter-of-factness as possible from

the crowded thoroughfare. They proceeded a dozen steps up the side street, Janet still burning with the insult and injustice of her husband's words.

"A fool!" she repeated in a whisper, rough with vehemence. "A fool! I didn't make a fool of you. Not a bit of it. Nor of myself. It was—"

"You did," he breathed in like tones, his heat returning. "I tell you that you did. Rushing pell-mell out of the office that way. It was a scandal. It was awful—you disgraced me."

"Disgraced you!" caught up the girl. "Disgraced you!" She trembled between rage and tears before she brought forth chokingly, "Disgraced you—I saved you!" and there was bitterness in every syllable.

Janet, in a quick sidelong glance, saw the livid emotion on his cheeks. He was severely stung and she had a second of terror lest Butler be swept past control to some excess of wrath. Heavy, sickening pulses beating within her gave her added alarm. Tired nerves, too, she passingly realised, were playing their part. She lagged a little behind him and could see him digging his fists deeper into his coat pockets. His head was down. Every line of his back and neck told of his misery and inward struggle. It was a grewsome moment. Presently Janet quickened her steps and again came abreast of him. She moistened her lips and in a serious, low voice said:

"We'll take up that—my conduct, my part—some other time. There's lots I want to ask you later, but—"

"Well, what?" he shot at her.

"Never mind now," she adjured, raising a hand. "Just tell me one thing. Butler. Let's straighten out some single matter, anyhow. Why didn't you tell me that you needed money for yourself?"

"Because," replied Butler, not looking at her, "I had never thought of it in that way."

"But Harsen had; Winter did," Janet pursued. They were nearing another crowded avenue.

"Well, I didn't."

The words were uttered with a firm, definite finality. Truth was stamped into every one of them. Even the surly brutality with which they were spoken increased the conviction they carried. Unreservedly, Janet was compelled to accept the fact—Butler had not thought of the matter as Harsen and Winter had.

They came to the corner, and Janet hesitated, at a standstill, uncertain in which direction Butler would turn. A train thundered overhead. They waited for it to pass and in that moment the girl's mind repeated her husband's words. Although her rational processes were clogged with half-spent feeling, she, nevertheless, seemed to sense in that brief declaration a momentous significance of some kind, altogether undefined, but more real than day and perfectly concrete if she could once get at it. In that single sentence she was sure that there was no end of clarifying meaning. What she needed was composure to think, to sort out the various elements of her perplexity. She wanted to

be alone. The train swept deafeningly along. Butler was confronting her with hard, squinting eyes.

"Well, what else is there?" he rasped. For an instant Janet looked up at him. His gaze, not precisely heartless, but bitter with the pangs of his own situation and devoid of all help and sympathy, did not swerve. It seemed to make her struggle to keep her measureless respect for him—her fathomless hopes for him—that much more difficult. She weakened utterly at the enormity of her task and momentarily could not reply.

"Well, what else is there?" Butler prodded.

He was still planted squarely in front of her, scowling, impatient, irascible as a goaded princeling.

"Nothing," said Janet, wearily closing her eyes and with a shake on her head, "Nothing—just now," and she seemed to droop.

Advancing an uncertain step or two, she turned. Butler was watching her, puzzled.

"Nothing, Butler, nothing," she declared slowly, and moved off down the side street from him.

"Mercy, you're a funny one," reached her, but she did not look around. She listened for his footfall. None came, and presently she realised that he had let her go her way. The interview sought with such agony of mind had lasted less than fifteen minutes.

Lotta Reynolds' apartment consisted of five rooms, up three flights, with no elevator to assist. A passageway, scarcely three feet wide, opened without ceremony

into a living-room large enough to accommodate a fair-sized table in the centre, a bookcase that was half filled, against one wall, a divan of admirable width against the other, no end of silver-framed photographs, and three chintz-upholstered chairs. It was not an apartment of reduced circumstances; it was an apartment of smart poverty.

There, at a few minutes after four o'clock, nearly an hour before Mrs. Reynolds was due, sat Janet, collapsed, crushed down, into one of the chairs. She was perfectly motionless and her hands lay dejectedly in her lap. The dullness of the winter afternoon was thickening around her as she stared blank and unseeing, at a grotesque red figure designed into the Egyptian quilt which covered the couch. . . . Janet had seen a spectre!

It had come at first nebulously, as she dragged the streets after she had parted from Butler. As she had calmed and her mind cleared of feeling it had assumed, in more definite lines, its terrifying form. Soon it had taken such well-marked shape that it literally bent her down. A man, hurrying past her, had checked his steps abruptly and followed her with a puzzled, half-anxious glance. This had roused her. She straightened up and cast about for the nearest hood of a subway entrance. A negro maid had admitted her to the apartment and Janet, leaden-limbed and weary-eyed, was surrendering herself to the misery of her thoughts.

She had been right. Butler's confession—the confession that he had not viewed his financial crisis as

Harsen or Winter had viewed it—did have a precipitate and clarifying meaning. It served to bring events of the week into focus. She understood now that her husband had been guilty of atrociously bad headwork, of a muddle-brained thinking regarding his own affairs that must have aroused the scorn of the other two men. Her own scorn was aroused.

There was an instant when Janet, transfixed in the chair, almost wished that Butler had lied—had purposely deceived her concerning his need of money. In that light the import of his affirmation that afternoon might not have been so far-reaching. As it was, she found in the halting, hesitating feebleness of her husband at the conference a significance more distressing than merely ignominious behaviour when her ideal of him had demanded that he should have been heroic. Had he been base instead of stupid, perhaps she could have escaped the inferences, paralysing to her brain, which the contrasts of the meeting had forced upon her. Maybe, too, she reflected, she could have detected something other than cowardice—yes, it was that—in Butler's trick to avoid the issues which a luncheon alone with her would have involved. But she put any such momentary wish from her as unworthy. The fact was her husband had told the truth and he had not thought of his own problem with the precision that an able man would.

It was a harrowing minute for Janet, when, for the first time in her life, she placed her husband, dispassionately and critically, upon the scales. The girl, as

she approached her task, was entirely conscious of what she was doing. She dreaded it. There was nothing she more ardently desired than the granite-like faith which she had heretofore possessed in Butler's powers, and in his destiny. She balked at that which lay before her and turned her glance, in a half-hope of distracting her thoughts, about the room. It rested, in quick succession, upon one silver-framed photograph after another. None of the faces did she recognise. Vaguely, in a distant corner of her brain, she wondered why Julian's was not there. Her breathing spell, her moment of respite, was brief. Back she came to the weighing of the man upon whom all of her dreams of life depended.

As she reckoned him, the girl seemed to crumble. In a panic, she searched her memory for props to uphold her faith. She recalled Harsen's overwhelming force; Winter's cool, collected air of command; Harsen's incisiveness and certainty; Winter's clarity and speed. She ranged further afield. Julian Powell came to mind, his manner of knowing precisely where he was going; old Mr. Styce—his biting directness, so keen that it was almost wit; her father—the painstaking thoroughness with which he used to begin to gather a subject into his hands. Butler—had he none of the badges or emblems of success! She journeyed up and down the hallways of her mind in a fruitless search, time and again stumbling over his haltings, his embarrassments, his uncertainties, and lastly, that outrageous piece of addle-headedness. It was as if a magnify-

ing glass through which, without knowing it, she had always viewed Butler, her own existence, the world, had been suddenly snatched from her hand.

Then came the spectre—a vision of life upon the terms which an unsuccessful husband imposed. She saw herself returned an embittered exile, to the stained, cracked pretentiousness of a stucco house in Meadow-hedge. One dreary year would follow another and the future would be unilluminated by the faintest ray of hope. Butler, ceaselessly pursuing his futile labors, seeking always to cheer her with false confidence—"Next year for certain, my dear, our ship will come in"—would age ingloriously. His eye would grow dead and listless, his coat sleeves shiny, and unpleasant knobs would come at the sides of his shoes. She herself would be an unlovely thing, with moist strings of grayish hair, rocking out her existence upon the tiny porch, attired in some kind of a dress that wasn't a dress but nearly a wrapper. And the boy—she could not bring herself to think what Butler's failure would mean for him! All her dreams would be gone. Reputation, homage, standing would be words to mock her. There would be no beautiful home; no motors; no trips to Europe—just the suffocation of mediocrity; the sogginess of fatally disheartened days. Janet shuddered.

But it was unthinkable that she, to whom unhappiness was poison, who wanted the best only because it was the best, who burned with desire, should have been born for nothing finer than the slough of failure. Her mind, her will, her forth-pouring love, she felt intensely,

must be cast for more exalted service. An instinct of self-preservation bade her deny her conclusions. There must be power in Butler! God's scheme of things could never have decreed that her husband should be unable to bring to her those beauties of life with which alone life was worth while. And she sprang up, pacing the floor, her hands at her temples, crying for faith in Butler's destiny and striving with every tense fibre of her being to command it.

Just then Mrs. Reynolds came in.

"Ma chérie! Ma chérie!" she exclaimed as she caught sight of the plague of trouble in Janet's eyes. "Don't! Don't Whatever is—don't! It doesn't pay. Come! We'll have a cocktail."

The girl shook her head and wondered what Mrs. Reynolds' suspicions must be. For the second time that day she had caught her in a moment of high agitation and feeling. Still it was impossible to explain.

"Thanks a lot—no," was all that Janet said, and it struck her as odd, when she was breasting existence so desperately, that a gay, olive-skinned, dancing-eyed person with a kind of three-quarters smile, should rush in and ask her to have a cocktail. A sense of the futility of things came to her.

"Very good—tea then!" Mrs. Reynolds made for the kitchenette, her high heels tapping sharply as she crossed a bare spot of the floor.

"Tillie! Tillie!" Lotta called, and from somewhere in the rear came:

"Yes, Mis' Reynolds." A negro girl, with a sly, cordial smile, appeared out of the passageway.

"Here!" commanded Lotta, "help with this tea."

Janet sat down and waited. Mrs. Reynolds rattled on to the accompaniment of the gentle clatter of cups, saucers, and spoons.

"A little tea, a beauty snooze, a bath, and you'll be a new woman, my dear—all ready for the bust. I've an idea we'll have a big time tonight. Julian will spread himself for you. Anyway, you've got to dig yourself out of your hole. Funking doesn't pay. I know! I used to funk a lot, once. Tillie, you've been stealing cream again," the door of an ice-box banged. "Yes, I understand! Don't trouble to lie. Now, Mrs. Pierce, my dear, just about one minute and I'll be ready."

Despite herself, Janet felt her load of anxiety lift a little. Lotta, very decidedly, had the trick of making gloom, when one was with her, if not impossible, at least difficult. The girl sensed, too in the cheering efforts which her friend was making a clear note of sympathy. She was grateful, and to be grateful with Janet, was to be very grateful.

"I've a big favour I want to ask you," she began impulsively, leaning forward in her chair as Mrs. Reynolds came into the room bearing the knick-knacks of tea.

"Anything, my dear," said Mrs. Reynolds, slipping her burden on to the table. Janet got to her feet and cleared away a pile of books.

"Do you know," she resumed, smiling to Mrs. Reynolds, demurely and bashfully, "if you don't mind, I do want so much to call you by your first name. Won't you call me by mine?"

"Why, certainly, you nice girl," replied Lotta, with something near emotion, and putting a hand for an instant on Janet's shoulders. "I'm delighted you've asked me. I'm not one of those first-name friends, but with you it's different."

"I'm awfully glad."

"Yes, it is quite different," Mrs. Reynolds repeated thoughtfully as she seated herself. "Some day I'll tell you why," she added a little absently as she arranged the cups in front of her.

Janet, dropping down, kept her eyes upon the other's face, which had suddenly lost its customary sparkle. For the first time since the girl had known her Lotta seemed grave. Janet wondered what was in her friend's mind.

"Tell me now," she urged. "Why quite different?"

"No, not now," replied Mrs. Reynolds, shaking her head and reaching for her little blue spot. "Not now. Let's wait and see how life uses us, my dear."

"How life uses us—what do you mean, Lotta?" She ended with a short, self-conscious laugh.

"Oh, where it lands us," continued the other, her fine brows together and her dark eyes down. She paused long enough to pour the tea and reach a cup to Janet.

"You can't always tell!" she half-sighed.

"Oh, yes, you can," affirmed the girl positively. She was surprised at this new furrow she had turned up in Julian's gay friend. "Life's what you make it. Determine what you'll be and you can be it. Well—that's what counts if you have a purpose."

It came to Janet in passing that all happiness for her depended upon it, that that doctrine should be true.

"Piffle!" vigorously rejoined Lotta, brushing her hand through the air and still serious. "Youthful nonsense! I once believed that sort of stuff. There's nothing in it. Why, I was going to be—" She hesitated for a second and then, with a hard laugh, went on: "What was I going to be? Well, never mind; it doesn't matter any more. The whole business of what you are and what you're going to be is nothing more or less than a question of chemicals. Yes, don't gasp—chemicals! It works this way; your creator—whoever he is—puts certain things in you—in certain proportions; so much will power, so much brain, a percentage of health, and so on. He mixes them all up together. That's you! Now, when that mixture's poured into the other great big mixture, life, the world—call it what you please—something happens. But whatever it is that does happen, you have absolutely nothing to say about it—nothing at all! No more than you can decree that pea-soup and ginger pop should mix up to gasoline. Determine what you're going to be! Oh, my child, that's—"

"Stop!" sprang involuntarily to Janet's lips, and

with a soft bang she set down her half-emptied cup on the edge of the table. "Please stop, Lotta. I can't bear that."

Her hands were over her eyes. Reading her own problem, in the light of Mrs. Reynolds' doctrine, had brought back all of her horror. Lotta stared.

"I'm a fool," she declared huskily, and getting abruptly to her feet wandered to the mantelpiece, where she found a cigarette.

Janet wrestled with herself. She was ashamed of her outburst, but it had been beyond her control. While Mrs. Reynolds had been speaking all of her dread at the promise of Butler's career, all of her revulsion at that vision of a life of failure, all of her indignation at her husband's pride-stung cruelty to her, had been revived. It had simply been too much for her, she told herself. She looked up to her friend, who was standing above her with the strained eyes of pity.

"Excuse me, Lotta," she said, with an half-attempt to smile, and added: "I'm in a heap of trouble that I can't tell anybody about."

The other never shifted her gaze nor her attitude. One hand was on her hip; the other, close to her up-tilted chin, balanced a cigarette within an inch of her lips. There was a moment of inscrutable silence. The pause lengthened. Lotta's arm went down.

"And excuse me, Janet," Mrs. Reynolds finally said, very slowly, walking away, and added: "I'm in a heap of trouble, too, that I can't tell anybody about."

She returned shortly toward the girl, her head thrown back as she ribboned smoke at the ceiling.

"And so, don't you see," she went on very quietly, her eyes half closed, "it's much better to wait and see how we both come through, what our troubles do to us, before—before—well, before we tell each other—" Again she hesitated, and then, picking up her cup, suddenly concluded: "Before you find out how badly some of my chemicals can work."

"Oh, Lotta," returned Janet tenderly, "I'm sure that yours will always work right."

Mrs. Reynolds did not reply, but beside the mantelpiece, in grave silence, finished her tea. A moment longer she lingered there, spinning the dregs and watching them.

"Come on," she said, jerking her shoulders up in a quick movement, as if to cast off her mood. "I've messed things up. I'm sorry. Let's find some sort of a gown for you."

Janet was relieved. There had been too much emotion between them for an immediate return to mere conversation. Lotta led the way along the hall, trailing smoke, and turned into her bedroom. She snapped on a light above a small dressing table scattered with the paraphernalia of hands and hair.

It was a cheerful little place done in rose. A huge wardrobe closet and a three-quarters brass bed crowded the space. Beside the bed was a reading stand, upon which was a shaded reading lamp, a yellow-covered novel, and an ash-tray. Into this ash-tray Mrs.

Reynolds, with the deft thumb of practice, crumpled her cigarette, at the same time calling out for Tillie.

The maid appeared. "I've a lady here to dress up," said Lotta, struggling to regain her customary flippancy. "Trot out what's in the closet and put 'em across the bed."

Tillie flung open the wardrobe doors, disclosing an array of gowns. The negress began spreading them before Janet, who, her hands behind her, leaned against the wall. The girl had never before borrowed a dress and felt a momentary embarrassment. But somehow Lotta's manner, as she sat by the dressing table, her legs crossed, seemed to make the proceeding natural enough. Janet had a sense of being in a new and oddly different world—a world in which there was not much decorum, but a great deal of a rather engaging informality.

"Take your pick," urged Mrs. Reynolds, with a dry smile, as she watched Janet view the filmy display.

Something in bluish purple, the skirt of which was showing, drew the girl's eye. She reached forward and caught the hem between her forefinger and thumb.

"I wonder if you're going to wear that?" she questioned deferentially.

Lotta, with mild amusement, affirmed that she was not. The maid separated the dress from the others and held it up by the shoulder straps for Janet's inspection. Instantly the girl saw that that dress at least would not do. The cut of the back dropped down nearly to the waist and she felt that it would require

a boldness she did not possess to expose herself in it for a front view. She was wondering how she could gracefully bring about another selection when Lotta burst into a laugh.

"Oh, take a chance for once," she urged. "You'll ravish Julian to death in that."

"But I don't want to ravish Julian!" protested Janet, smiling.

"Well, you ought to. You could make a wonderful beau out of him."

"But I don't have beaux!" asserted the girl soberly.

"I know—I know you don't," declared Lotta, springing up, "but you'll co^r to it. They all do. But never mind. Let's see if there's not something else." She pulled out and held up a soft grey. "There's conservatism for you!" she announced, her carefree manner fully returned.

"Oh no!" gasped Janet. The second gown, so far as the girl could see, more than challenged the first.

"But it's got a lot of back. See!" Mrs. Reynolds turned it around.

"Yes, but look at the shoulders. I'm sure if I ever got in it that it would seem just about to fall off every minute."

"Why, that's just what you want!"

"Is it?" the girl asked in a low key.

An examination of Mrs. Reynolds' wardrobe produced small choice from Janet's point of view. The upshot was that they settled upon the bluish purple

which had first attracted her eye. Janet was disturbed and dismayed and she knit her brows in perplexity. The maid, with a grin, gathered up the gowns and returned them to their hangers in the closet. Mrs. Reynolds, still amused, stood in the doorway. Shortly Tillie departed.

"It will be all right, my dear," laughed Mrs. Reynolds, coming into the room. "You'll be marvellous in it."

"Well, I hope so," sighed Janet. The prospect of the party that night began to appall her. That she should have to make a public appearance in what she deemed the outrageous candor of Mrs. Reynolds' gown sickened her. Suppose she should meet some one whom she knew! Politeness alone checked her tongue. She was standing by the window playing with the curtain cord and gazing across narrow back lots at the tiers of sordidness which the rear of a New York apartment-house may expose.

"Mediocrity," she reflected, with a little nervous chill. She turned about.

"Lotta, I wonder if I may lie down, now?" she asked.

"That's precisely the programme," cheerfully responded her friend, who had been fumbling in the closet. "Here," and with that she tossed Janet a soft, beribboned thing.

The girl caught it. There came to her, deliciously, the odour of a sense-soothing perfume. It struck her how characteristic of Lotta that odour was—breathing

a pampered delicacy, good-taste, an endless appetite for comfort, and, perhaps, for love.

"You stay here," said her friend brusquely. "I'll go to the couch in front and rout you up when it is time to dress."

She moved to the door. "Don't worry, child, about your togs."

"All right," said Janet, trying to smile, but as the latch clicked behind Mrs. Reynolds the girl wondered how she should ever be able to get herself through the evening that was before her.

The softness of the dressing gown was soothing as she slipped it on. She switched off the light and stretched herself, with a sigh, on the bed, a bare arm across her eyes. Her limbs relaxed, but her mind spun on. For five minutes or so she lay still. It came to her presently that a restaurant, heavy with the grossness of voluptuaries and a theatre celebrating, no doubt, some gay triviality of life, were odd places in which to seek that peace and faith she so urgently needed. And seeking it attired in such a garment as she would have to wear! Soon she found herself resenting Julian's well-meant efforts to ease the strain between Butler and herself. She remembered how the party had happened to be planned. At that recollection she burned with fresh shame. Harassed in whatsoever groove her mind travelled, she jerked herself to a sitting position in the bed.

For a time she sat with her knees raised and her head resting on her slender arms. The scene enacted in the

front room of the apartment with Mrs. Reynolds presented itself to her. She wondered what Lotta's trouble could be, and was perfectly certain it could not be as severe as her own. Wasn't it curious—the exigencies by which different people supported their troubles? Look how her friend did it! Always on the go! She asked herself how she met trouble and reflected that she did not know. There had been the death of her father, but that was not the same type of thing. Grief did not involve keen anxiety, shame, terrifying doubt. She had now come upon her first experience of venomous unhappiness. Could all life possibly be scourged as it was now? If it were, she was sure that she did not want to live.

"This is morbid!" she exclaimed half aloud and flung up her head. Leaning swiftly over, she turned on the bedside light.

The little ash-tray, with its thumb-crushed cigarette, confronted her eye. For the first time she noticed the odour of the dead, damp tobacco. There was a small drawer conveniently in the top of the reading stand. She opened it.

The calm light, under the pink shade, glowed. Off somewhere a telephone bell sounded. The distant rattle of a surface car bumping over cross tracks rose vaguely above the ceaseless booming of the city. Within the apartment no one seemed to stir. Mrs. Reynolds, perhaps with her trouble, had gone to the living-room.

Over the open drawer, the ash-tray trembling in an

upraised hand, Janet balanced, staring at what she had seen. Her weight rested upon one elbow; her knees were drawn up; her girlish, black stockinged ankles trailed over the counterpane. Her lips were faintly parted and in the column of her bare throat a pulse, rivet-like, throbbed.

For a long, deadly minute she remained thus. Then her lifted arm, as if by its own weight, dropped, toppling the shade of the reading lamp. The ash-tray struck the floor with a small crash. Her head fell forward on her breast and with a groan she seemed to collapse and crumble together.

She lay, in the perfumed dressing gown, a miserable, beaten heap, upon Lotta Reynolds' bed.

CHAPTER XI

A BORROWED GOWN

It was some months before Janet was able to get quite the straight of the events of that evening and the next day. Her conception of the world had to be made over and it became necessary for her to accustom herself to the idea that the business of life was not the simple, pleasurable affair she had imagined. New possibilities of awfulness, new pitfalls which had always seemed infinitely remote from her existence had been revealed to her. The imminence of some of these gave her for a time a positive terror of living which, until she got over it, seemed to benumb her faculties.

She had fallen a long way from the glorified summits of confidence upon which she had lived and had landed with the painful realisation that the goodness of her own particular destiny was by no means assured. Until that time most calamities which were visited upon people had been mere abstractions to her. Starvation, for example, had actually meant nothing so far as she personally was concerned; there was not the most remote chance that she would ever starve. Some things simply did not happen to girls like her. As with starvation, so until that very day, with failure and mediocrity; and precisely as she had always as-

sumed that of course *her* husband would be successful and measurably affluent, so she had always assumed that he would be affectionate and faithful. It had no more occurred to her that she might be called upon to endure a life of coolness and estrangement than it had that she might have to live through drab years of poverty. The thought that the world was exactly as likely to deal her, as any one else, its ugliest blows was, as it presented itself, horrifying. And she had never really grappled with it before until that afternoon when she lay, crushed and motionless, upon Lotta Reynolds' bed.

The thing which she had discovered was not, as she presently acknowledged, of much importance, in itself. It might have seemed so had there not been an inner voice of supreme authority to whisper to her. As it was, not many moments had elapsed before she realised that there was no occasion to take the matter so tragically. Butler may have shown himself well-nigh heartless; he may have appeared ominously inadequate in affairs; but there could be no question of his fidelity. A feminine understanding, built upon countless intimate details of daily life, told her with a clarity and certainty that there was no stain upon their love; that was beyond dispute. Against that understanding, not even the discovery, in Lotta's bedside stand, of the full-length photograph of Butler—loose-jointed, stalwart, with wide boyish blue eyes—could have any actual validity. And this, too, despite its clumsily penned inscription, "My best to you, always—BUTLER."

Of course, Janet wondered why the photograph was there, but that consideration did not puzzle her for long. She understood and reached a conclusion which, upon reaching it, left her with a sickened feeling—a feeling not in the least mitigated by the delicately venal perfume that she was breathing from the folds of Lotta's dressing gown. A beautiful and alluring woman was in love with her husband!

Well, what of it, she asked herself, and by way of answer there returned to her a chance and innocent remark of Butler's one night, months back, upon the train. "You could get a lesson from her," he had said. Other recollections followed; there was his open admiration for Lotta that very day before they had gone into lunch; and then that vision of Butler's eyes and the look that had been in them when he and Janet had parted that afternoon—hard, with outraged pride, bitter, as if he and she had never known each other's love. What if she, in her quest for happiness and the glories of the world, should ever be conscripted for a shameful contest with another woman for Butler's affection? Janet shuddered, and in the next breath found that, whereas a little more than an hour before she had been weighing Butler in relation to herself, now she was weighing herself in relation to Butler.

Her first positive act was to spring in an impulsive and resilient bound from the bed and slip Lotta's dressing gown from her. The mere touch of the garment suddenly seemed an offence. She was stooping over to

pick up the fallen ash-tray and lamp shade when the door opened abruptly.

"Why—why. What's wrong?"

Halted in the doorway was Lotta. Before Janet could manage a reply the question had answered itself. Mrs. Reynolds' eyes were upon the small open drawer of the reading stand. There was a mirthless smile upon her lips, which changed to a strained laugh as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

They faced each other. Janet's arms and neck were bare and the whitish light of the uncovered bulb gave a quality of lustrous purity to her fair, fresh skin. For an instant their eyes met; Lotta bit at her lip before she spoke.

"Well," she said, "that *was* careless of me, wasn't it?"

Janet made no reply. Revolving the small pink shade in her hands, she continued to watch Mrs. Reynolds through upraised eyes. She caught herself involuntarily reckoning the other woman and appraising her charms—her long-nailed fingers, her dark, abundant hair, the texture of her skin. Presently Mrs. Reynolds spoke again.

"You see it's all right," she said. "Quite all right because—"

"Yes?" came from Janet in a dry tone, her glance not wavering.

"Because," and with this Mrs. Reynolds' eyes met the girl's squarely. "Because I stole it."

"You stole it!"

Lotta merely nodded.

"Who from?" demanded Janet.

"From Julian," said Lotta simply.

They studied each other through what seemed a long moment.

"Oh," Janet finally achieved in a scarcely audible breath. She turned and began fitting, with long pink fingers, the shade over the lamp.

"Yes, I stole it from Julian," went on Lotta, leaning against the wall, her hands behind her. "Took it in my muff one day when I was at his place. I don't know why. Well, yes, I do. It was because—" She dropped the sentence there.

There was a silence which emphasised the awkwardness between them. Janet, her face averted, continued beside the stand. The circled upward projection of light showed her fine brows drawn together in thought. She was weighing Mrs. Reynolds' words. Lotta was no fool; she would not be guilty of a false statement the falsity of which could be so easily proved. It did not matter much anyway; with her own faith in Butler secure, the past seemed of less moment than the future.

"I wanted to put the ash-tray somewhere," the girl explained to end the pause. "That's how I happened to open the drawer."

"Oh, it's all right," returned Lotta indifferently, and went out. Janet heard her slow footsteps tap the length of the hall. A door opened at the end of the passage and closed. Then there was no other sound.

Janet sank down on the edge of the bed. It suddenly came over her how fantastically impossible it would be for her to go to Julian's party that night. Already she had revolted at the prospect; now, appalled by the heavy threat of life, she determined that she must escape. At the moment she thought that her one great need was to be alone. Nor did she wish to meet Butler; it would be far better, she was sure, to delay their next encounter until she would have been able to work out what, precisely, from the gross mud-dle of their affairs, there was to say. A fresh remembrance of the audacious gown which had been selected for her to wear that evening sealed the girl's decision. Janet searched for her skirt and began to dress.

She was clicking the last catch of the placket when the telephone, somewhere in the apartment, rang. A moment later and she heard the door at the end of the passage open and Mrs. Reynolds returning down the hall. Janet moved to the dressing table to find a pin and did not turn about even when she was conscious that Lotta had come a few steps into the room.

"Julian's on the wire," said Mrs. Reynolds, casually and apparently ignoring Janet's preparations. "He wants to know whether you'd prefer Taratan's or Hampton's."

"I'm not going to the party," returned Janet. "I'm going home."

There were some seconds of strained quiet. With false industry the girl searched for the pin she wanted. Lotta was the first to speak.

"Then you don't believe me?" she demanded. "Don't think I stole the photograph?"

"Yes, I believe you," said Janet simply and conclusively.

"Then why are you going home and quitting the party?" Mrs. Reynolds' tone was vaguely sharp and she was watching Janet intently. "Why make all this fuss—put so much importance, unless—unless you think—"

Light came to the girl. Loyalty to Butler, her own faith in his loyalty to her, dictated her reply. "Well, not anyway on account of that silly thing," she said, throwing a negligent nod at the drawer of the bedside stand, and then raised the neat oval of her chin to pin her collar.

Lotta shrugged her shoulders. "Then speak to Julian yourself," she said. "I'm going to take my bath," and she crossed to the wardrobe closet.

The fates were against Janet. She went to the telephone in the small, dark entrance hallway and caught up the dangling receiver. "I can't go, Julian," she tried to explain, "I'm all fagged out." There was no reply; only a burring silence, and then Butler's voice over the wire.

"What's this nonsense?" he demanded testily. "Everything's arranged. You can't back out now!" Again there was the vision of Butler's squinting, unyielding eyes that afternoon; his tone now matched that look.

"Butler, I can't go," began Janet weakly. "I sim-

ply can't. I'm tired—absolutely done. But that's not all—not the main point.”

“Well, what *is* the main point—as you call it?” he asked, his irritation evidently not lessened.

Janet reached about and closed the door so that Mrs. Reynolds might not overhear what she had to say. “Don't, Butler,” she pleaded. “Please—please, don't speak to me like that. The trouble's this—I can't—oh, it would be impossible for me, to wear any of Mrs. Reynolds' gowns. Why, I never realised how—how awful they are. You would never have me—”

“Mrs. Reynolds dresses very smartly,” put in Butler severely. “What's wrong with the dress she offers?”

“Oh—dear—it's so naked!”

“Ridiculous!”

“You'd never have me show myself in it. I'm sure you wouldn't.”

“Let me judge. Put it on. I'll be down presently and tell you if I think it's all right.”

Janet yielded and in yielding she knew that it was because she had not dared refuse. She was conscious of a new weakness; the discovery which she had made that afternoon had sapped her courage with her husband. For a moment she rested her head, her eyes closed, against the wall beside the telephone. Life, indeed, seemed overwhelming just then.

Presently she opened the door and returned to the bedroom. Lotta, in her bathrobe, stood, a pillar of pink, in the middle of the floor.

"Well?" she questioned, raising the thin drawn line of her eyebrows.

"Well, I'll dress anyway," replied Janet shortly and wearily. It was difficult to be decent to Lotta.

"That's fine. I'm glad." And Mrs. Reynolds, evidently straining to bring some ease between them, moved leisurely and luxuriantly toward her bath.

A half an hour or so later Janet had got into Mrs. Reynolds' bluish purple gown. She stood before the mirror and observed herself. The effect seemed appalling and she crimsoned at the mere thought of so blatant an exposure of bare flesh before strange eyes. There was nothing of a modesty which her upbringing had taught her. As she turned about for a glimpse of the back of the gown and saw an audacious reach of gleaming flesh, she felt oddly dissociated from herself. It was as if she were a different person.

"Why, you're stunning—perfectly stunning!" Lotta was exclaiming from the other side of the room.

"Am I?" returned Janet nervously. "I feel awfully bare."

"Oh, you'll get used to that soon," laughed Mrs. Reynolds. "Just look at me!"

She spun herself around, her shapely arms extended. Mrs. Reynolds' dress was a triumph of seductive attire. Of a vivid green colour, it would immediately draw the eye, but its gasping boldness would carry the glance to the soft curves of Lotta's neck and shoulders and to the delicate, smooth modelling of her back, exposed unreservedly far down toward the waist. The

skirt was in keeping, and at each movement of her limbs their shapely slender outlines were, with studied art, half-suggested. There was fright in the girl's soul as she took account of Lotta's unblushing display of charm.

"See?" cried Lotta, clearly enough pleased with herself.

"Yes, I see," said Janet, and moved languidly to the bed and sat on the edge. "But I'm afraid I can't get used to this sort of thing. I guess you're different. But anyway I'm sure Butler won't let me wear this dress—the one I've on."

"Won't let you wear it!" Mrs. Reynolds took Janet's place before the dressing table. "Why, my dear, he'll think you charming."

An unreasoned flame of anger shot through the girl. By what authority did this woman instruct her in Butler's likes and dislikes? But she quelled her resentment and merely said stiffly: "I'm quite sure you're wrong."

For a moment Mrs. Reynolds lingered before the mirror, performing the last rites of her toilet. Janet, from the bed, watched her and found herself, as she took fresh note of Lotta and her gown, passionately eager to know what kind of a woman the other really was; how her true character was composed. She was an enigma, the girl felt. There was good in her—kindness, sympathy; and she was engaging, dangerously engaging, with her vivacity and ready fun. But there was something amiss; the clot Lotta wore—

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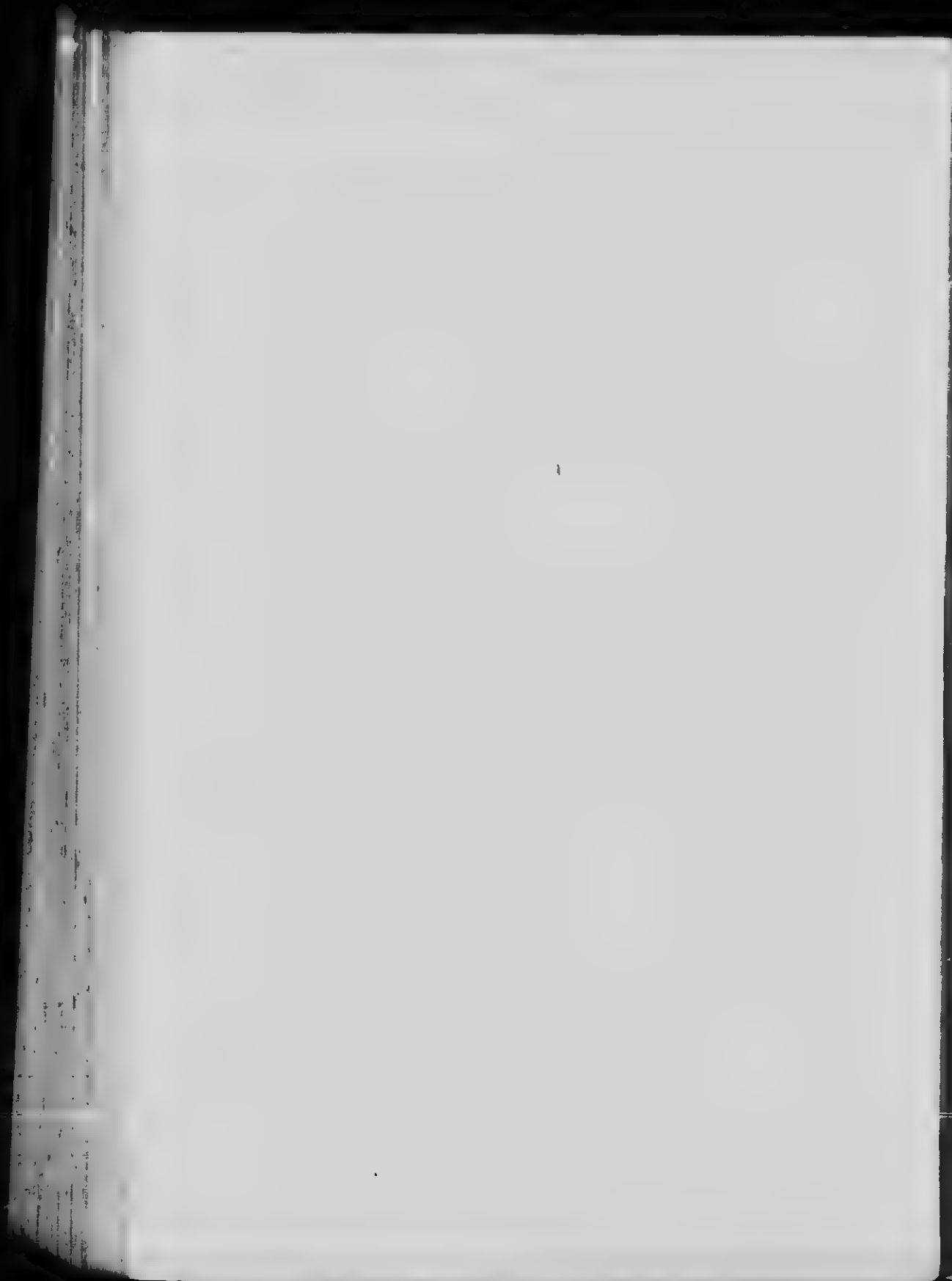
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"It's hard to get used to the idea," Lotta asked casually,
"that another woman's in love with your husband"?



that photograph. Janet's brow was still clouded with these speculations when Mrs. Reynolds, delving into the recesses of the wardrobe for evening wraps, tossed a yellow cloak to the girl and said:

"Come on! We'll wait for the men up front," and with that she started to lead the way down the hall. Dispiritedly, Janet got up and followed.

"It's hard to get used to the idea, isn't it?" Lotta asked casually as they came into the living-room.

"What idea?" questioned Janet, and found a chair.

"Oh," returned Lotta, reaching up to switch on more lights and bringing for an instant the firm, clean muscles of her back into shaded lines. "The idea that another woman's in love with your husband. It's strange, isn't it?"

Janet did not reply immediately. She had no mind to match Lotta's candour. Even if they both knew the fact, there seemed something not quite decent in throwing it out in the open there between them. The girl watched Mrs. Reynolds settle herself beside the table and beat down the end of a cigarette.

"I haven't thought much about the idea," Janet finally said distantly.

"Oh—I see," rejoined Mrs. Reynolds, smiling vaguely, and with a sure, practised touch striking a match. "Well, it's very easy for you nice, sheltered girls to be high and mighty about that sort of thing—awfully easy." She paused to light her cigarette and composed herself in the recess of her chair. "But you don't know anything about it. That's your trou-

ble. You love your husbands and generally your husbands love you. It's all so simple. But, Lord, I didn't intend to do it—to fall in love with your man. It just happened. I wish it hadn't, but I couldn't help it, and anyhow there is absolutely no use in taking it as you are. We were about to be such friends, you know."

Grimly, the girl recalled her impulsive outburst of affection in the afternoon. Now she was able to be scarcely polite. She resented the woman instinctively and all that she seemed to stand for. Picking at a fold of her dress, her eyes down, Janet was debating a reply when Mrs. Reynolds laughed outright.

"It would never have occurred to you," she added, "to fall in love with another woman's husband, now would it?"

"No," said Janet uncompromisingly. "I'm quite sure it would not."

"Of course it wouldn't," laughed Lotta and paused to flick her lashes before she pursued with abrupt seriousness: "Once it would never have occurred to me. But life beat that instinct of decency out of me—as it did a lot of other decent instincts." She stopped again and let her eyes wander about the room. "Then I had to turn around and build up a special set of principles to take care of me—to keep me from being all bad," she finished.

"There is no such thing as a special set of principles," asserted Janet shortly. She disliked the discussion and her mind was on Butler's arrival.

"Oh, my poor child," rejoined Mrs. Reynolds, get-

ting up and moving restlessly toward the mantelpiece, "if things were only all cut and dried like that. But they're not. I've found that I have to have my own special principles."

Janet's curiosity prompted her to unbend a little. "Do you live up to them?" she asked quietly, not looking at Lotta.

"As well as most people, I guess," came the reply. "Perhaps a little better. You see mine aren't very hard." She paused and Janet glanced toward her. The elbow of her dark bare arm rested on the mantel and she was gazing off above the girl's head. "Those principles of mine," she added, with a short laugh, "they'd sound awfully funny to you. You'd never need most of them in your life."

Janet, puzzled, continued to study Mrs. Reynolds with a non-committal, sidewise scrutiny. "Yes, I think I live up to them pretty well," mused Lotta; and finally the girl brought forth:

"What are some of your principles?"

Mrs. Reynolds, with a gleam of white teeth, threw back her head and laughed. "They matter now, don't they,—now that you've found me out?" and Janet crimsoned.

"Not at all," she affirmed indignantly and sat back in her chair. "I was merely interested."

"Oh, come now," cried Lotta, and crossing, put a cool, friendly hand on Janet's shoulder. "Be nice and I'll tell you—at least I'll tell you one. It will maybe cheer you a bit for the evening."

Involuntarily Janet tried to shake off Lotta's touch. She had a sense that Mrs. Reynolds was treating her as a child. She twisted around with an attempted dignity that gave spirit to her youth.

"Well?" she asked, and as she looked up the tender line of her cheek showed against the light.

Mrs. Reynolds smiled down upon Janet—a thin, tired smile—and meeting the girl's eyes, shook her head almost sadly. "You poor little kid," she said.

In the kitchen a push button rattled in vigorous, rapid strokes. With a final and friendly pat upon Janet's arm, Lotta walked slowly to the hall. The girl's intent gaze followed her as she unlatched the door and left it open by a crack. Momentarily Janet's mind was again upon the dress she wore. She was sure that Butler could never wish his wife attired as she was then.

Lotta returned to the room and, standing above the table as she snuffed out her cigarette, she resumed. "Well, my dear Janet," she said, without the least hesitation over the name, "I'll tell you. One of my principles is this—and I live up to it—never come between a man and a woman when they are reasonably—just reasonably, I say"—she paused and immediately concluded, with a bright smile—"reasonably happy together. Remember that!"

At first Janet's face was a blank. As the words sank in, with their revelation of the soul of the woman who kept Butler's photograph at her bedside, the girl

gasped. Her cheeks flushed and the flush spread along the white column of her throat.

"Oh," she cried, horrified, and was on her feet. Mrs. Reynolds continued to smile. Janet took an incredulous step toward her and stopped; and thus for an instant she stood, beneath the overhead lights, her naked arms and neck glowing, her girlish bosom exposed, her warm, firm flesh rich with the very fragrance of youth and health and purity.

At a sound from the door she turned.

"My God, Janet," came in noisy tones from the dimness of the hall, "you've never looked half so good to me in all your life!"

Followed by Julian, Butler walked in.

In the Pierce family a quarrel had never been a matter of serious moment. Janet and Butler had always managed to compose their differences speedily. The fact was that they had developed a sort of formula of reconciliation. It began usually with Butler's asking why Janet was "put out." Thereupon Janet would state her case; at which Butler would mumble an apology, garnished over with an explanation. Janet would accept both; Butler would kiss her and whisper a good deal more fervent apology in her ear. Janet would kiss him and plead that she was entirely at fault. Never once, in their married life, had they neglected to heal,

by this procedure, any open issue between them before they had retired to bed for the night.

And Janet, as she drew her yellow wrap around her bare shoulders and tripped with every mark of grace at her command down the stairs of the apartment-house, was certain that, despite all the events of the day, they would not fail to do so now.

That thought helped to carry her through; and coupled with it was the thought that never before had she so desired and needed her husband's warm embrace. She was aghast at the prospect of life; possessed of a great sense of helplessness against the world which had been revealed to her. Every dream was threatened; every vista shadowed by a cloud and never more than then did she crave what she so indubitably had learned was the most important thing in her existence—her husband's love.

She burned for the saving word from him and believed that she could banish the demons of lost ideals, of failure, of mediocrity, if she could but once regain the protection of his arms. Thus, in a sort of hysteria of dread, but confident of the hour when they should be alone, she fought her way through the glittering New York night of Julian's moneyed wand.

She would not see the stares and nudges of men, as, crimson to her temples, she edged by the plush rope of Hampton's tapestried dining-room. Although she cringed beneath covert glances at her naked back, she simulated delight at the salmon, which the head-waiter explained had come from Labrador in crates of ice.

She even sipped at her goblet of champagne and in the theatre tried to applaud a bare-kneed quartette. The cabaret was a horror. Only twice did she expose herself upon the floor. Every moment of the time she was telling herself that on the train would come her reward and her husband would speak.

But he did not. He yawned his way from one bleak, empty station shed to another. Janet, because she had to have one, quickly found an excuse; the train was not a place in which for them to mend their quarrel. They stepped out at Tuckerton and found a frail-wheeled hack. With punctilious solicitude, Butler tucked a robe about her cold ankles. He climbed in, but did not reach for her hand. Instead he drew himself into a corner with a cigarette. Finally they were in their bedroom.

It was a chill, spiritless hour of early morning; a lonely silence seemed to engulf and fill the house. Butler was moving from window to window drawing down the shades. Janet sought their night things upon the back of the closet door and glanced inquiringly and apprehensively over her shoulder at her husband. It seemed to her that he had never looked more handsome nor splendid than then. The snugly cut evening clothes he wore made him seem larger and taller than usual and imparted decidedly to him an air of well-being. There was a slight bulge to the stiff bosom of his shirt which brought out the youthful, trained-down slimness of his waist. His white tie gave the effect of having been done negligently in a hurry,

of not having been fussed over, of having somehow achieved a correctness beyond criticism. His dark hair was still unruffled, running back smartly from his clear, well-modelled forehead. As Janet tossed her blue-ribboned night-dress and Butler's pajamas over the foot of their bed she paused and half turned toward him.

He was beside the clothes-tree, deliberately unbuttoning his vest, and, his head to one side, striving to catch in a low whistle the tune with which that night they had been played out of the theatre. Words rose in her throat, but did not come to her lips. They checked themselves. Janet had never made the first move; she could not, somehow dared not, now. She began to unfasten Lotta Reynolds' gown.

As she was stepping out of it Butler spoke. The baby, sleeping in the next room, enjoined little more than a whisper. The girl did not catch what her husband had said. She bent toward him.

"I say," repeated Butler cheerfully, "that Julian surely knows how to give a party."

Janet nodded. That cheerfulness of her husband's was more disheartening than peevish surliness would have been. To hide her face at the moment, the girl quickly crossed to the bureau and started to unloose the flood of her hair.

"Wasn't that dinner a wonder?" prattled on Butler as if he had forgotten that it was to her he had directed those angered words and harsher looks that very day. "I don't see how Julian ever thinks up such new

and different things to eat. That was an Egyptian bird of some sort tonight—a quail, I think. And isn't it funny to watch Julian? Me sitting there, my mouth open and not knowing whether it's a bird or a rabbit or some kind of a snake he's got, and Julian never for a moment stopping his talk, even to look at it, and going at it just as matter of fact as if he ate one of them instead of eggs for breakfast every morning of his life. . . . And the show?"

He paused to pull his shirt over his head, and stood forth with his muscled arms bare and the contours of his chest proclaiming strength. "Yep, that fellow Peters," he resumed, "is a real comedian—at least he can get the laughs out of me. Why, when he made his curtain speech the man in front of me nearly fell into the aisle. Did you see him?"

Janet, coiling the last of her braid, smiled remotely.

"Yes, I saw him, Butler," was all she said; and he, moving leisurely about the room ignored Janet's silence, and all else, and continued to recreate for himself what had apparently been to him the joys of the evening. Now and again there was a false note; too pretentious a light-heartedness, too elaborate an unconcern, too marked haste to fill each pause.

At length Janet kicked off her slippers, stripped down her stockings, and with a slight shiver of cold and nervousness, crawled into her side of the bed. She sank down, watching Butler through half closed eyes beneath which were faint shadows of fatigue. Her lithe young body was outlined beneath the coverings

and the long, thick golden twist of her hair stretched across the whiteness of the pillow. Butler, in his pajamas, was fumbling behind one of the drawn blinds to raise a window.

"Yes," he was saying in his same cheerfully reminiscent voice, "it was a great evening, and, Janet—" There was a bound of a hope within her. He reached up to snap out the lights, but did not permit his glance to meet hers. Suddenly there was darkness and she knew Butler was groping his way along the footboard. "And, Janet, you certainly were the stunning lady in that dress," he concluded, and in a second more was easing his solid weight into the bed.

"I tell you what," he went on, as if that day for Janet had never been lived, "a little fun like that once in a while helps a lot. Lifts a fellow out of himself, you know."

At the last words Janet held her breath and waited. The black silence continued. She wondered if he would take her into his arms. Her heart pounded; it seemed that he must almost be able to hear it.

Butler yawned.

A hot tear went down the girl's cheek. Butler turned heavily upon his side of the bed. She poked her pillow for sleep. Her voice held steady.

"Good-night, Butler."

"Good-night, Janet."

CHAPTER XII

JANET AND BUTLER

At tea time the next afternoon Janet sat in the same spot where she had sat at tea time on Sunday a week ago—in front of the fire in the long, low living-room of the Pierce home, with the white woodwork and dark chintzes of her eager fancy. Just seven days had passed since Butler had stood on the hearth there before her and told her of the paper order that was to give new impetus to the firm, with the success of which so many of the girl's bright hopes were linked. She remembered the flooding sunshine and the dazzling, snowy cheerfulness of that other afternoon. Now the high windows at the end of the room disclosed a flat and rain-spent sky. An ankle-deep wash of dirty slush, upon the paths and roads of Tuckerton hill, had kept Butler indoors. Now and again Janet could hear him moving about in the regions above.

It had been a gruelling day for her. By a sudden, angry word in the morning she had forced Butler to abandon the mockery of his artificial attitude of the night before, and thereafter his manner had frankly acknowledged their quarrel. But hour after hour had passed without a syllable from him to mend it, and not only was the corpse-like thing still between them, but Janet was steadily, with hardening resentment,

loading her indictment of him with heavier counts of heartlessness and ingratitude and increasingly blinding herself to the evidence of her deeper feeling for him, of which the very poignancy of her suffering was proof.

She was at a loss to explain his unwillingness to end the miserable situation. Nothing that she had done seemed to justify his cool indifference. She recognised that in seeking to buttress up her faith in his abilities she had outraged his pride; her abrupt and frightened departure from the meeting with Harsen and Winter had not been to his liking. But what were those offences compared with his? And had her husband no gratitude? At all events, this warfare of strained, punctiliously polite phrases, and worse silences could not endure. It was intolerable, and besides, she thought, a little pettish. The girl determined that if Putler did not offer a conciliatory word before dinner she herself would bring focus to their quarrel. If she did, however, and she repeated the declaration several times, there would be a high reckoning of self-abasement for her husband to pay.

This was her mood when a cumbersome brown limousine rounded to the door and from its engulfing depth Charles Winter hopped nimbly forth and with business-like strokes upon Janet's well-polished gargoye knocker proclaimed his arrival.

"Ah, my dear Janet, you look tired," was his greeting, and then, without more ceremony, as he peeled off his overcoat, "Where's Butler?"

She explained and called her husband. A door

opened. "Yes?" came in stiff rising inflection. Janet, without a hint of estrangement in her voice, announced their visitor, and presently Butler, his hands in the pockets of his jacket, his frown carefully obliterated, appeared upon the stairs. Winter, striving to warm his meagre self at the fire, lost no time. "I've something important to say to you two people," he declared crisply, "and it may take some little while. I came today because I wasn't certain of another immediate conference."

With that he began, and it was some four hours later when the talk had ended, and Janet, staring at the collapsed red embers within the hearth, waited for Butler to return from handing the little lawyer into his machine. A thoughtful hand at her cheek, she was wondering if her husband would be sensible enough to dwarf their quarrel before the newly disclosed exigencies of their common situation.

Winter's mission had been advice—and something more; a sharp warning, a vigorous injunction. At the outset he made it clear that he had come, not as Janet's kindly mentor, but as attorney for a person who had advanced money to Butler. In building various steps to his conclusions, he had nailed his facts without attempting to lighten his blows. Through much of the long interview Butler had halted, hesitated, even squirmed. But, relentless as a small terrier, Winter had harried for his answers until he got them. At more than one moment which Janet could recall, her husband had been a sorry figure.

"Now let me explain," Butler had begun once in reply to a question. "You see, it was this way—"

"Yes or no, Butler?" the lawyer had insisted, with a jerk of his great head. "Does Harsen's name without yours carry a check or does it not? That's simple!"

"Now, listen—" the young man had again faltered.

"Oh, answer, Butler!" Janet had put in with an impatient gesture of disgust. She could see again, with a shudder, the look he had shot at her in that instant.

Fresh revelations, too, had come to the girl; other clouding visions of life. For example, Harsen's "game," as they had called it, seemed to her a shocking disclosure of what went on in those towering, hive-like homes of business. "The fellow's tactics," Winter had declared, "are as simple as they are common, and they are as common in offices as ink-wells and blotters. He's going to keep on hammering at you, picking quarrels, manufacturing rows, humiliating you, discrediting you, until he has beaten you to a pulp and you will do anything at all for peace—sign away your birth-right to save your nerves." That particular kind of horribleness, however, in Janet's once beneficent world, seemed just then a little consequence.

Outside, the door of the motor banged and the lawyer's parting words returned vividly to her. "You've both been supremely foolish," he had said, shaking his hat at them as they stood before him. "You've shown yourselves little more than children!"

Janet had no right to tamper with her legacy. Butler, you blundered frightfully in Harsen. Now you've got on your hands a high-class trickster who is just honest enough so that he is difficult to get at. His objects are perfectly clear. What you've admitted to me tonight, what I saw for myself the other day, put beyond dispute that he's trying to force you out of your own concern. And I think he's in a fair way to do it. Where will you two be then? Butler without a job, Janet's legacy gone, and as for your mother's money—well, he'd have that, too, and with small chance for us ever to recover it. I've wanted to open your eyes to just where this more or less visionary undertaking of an independent business is leading. Both of you see, don't you?" And they had nodded grave assents as Winter put his hand on the knob and concluded: "Get rid of Harsen. He's dangerous! And, Butler, you're no match for him."

The motor outside was now starting and there was the sound of scuffling feet on the short brick walk. The door opened and closed and Janet's husband came into the room.

She half turned her head to see his face and take the measure of what his attitude toward her would now be. It was impossible to read his features beyond the range of light, and her frightened eyes followed him to the round mahogany table which was a comfortable distance from the fire. He stood there silently thumbing the pages of a bright red-bound book. His eyes were pinched up and every feature, every line of his body

expressed the harassment of his soul. Shame, anxiety, anger all beset him. Janet had a conscious flicker of pity for him, but as he suddenly spoke it died.

"Well, you see where you've landed me," he said and, turning peevishly about, he drew up an armchair. The girl stifled her first wrath. She thought his manner was in part a shield for the wounds to his pride.

"Don't you think, Butler," she said in a controlled and sober voice, "that it would be better to say 'where we have landed ourselves'?"

"Each other, you mean," he retorted, and sat down.

"Very well," Janet returned, with a sense of her superiority in this crisis. "If you insist upon looking at matters in that way, all right. It's immaterial now. What's to be done is the question. We're in a bad fix."

"There's only one thing to be done," he affirmed with certain decision. "Just one." He had been leaning back in the chair. Now he sat forward, and, pointing a long, menacing finger at her, added: "And it seems to me you ought to do it." His full lips closed tight and for an instant he held his position, his eyes bitter and unloving.

With a small, feeble gesture of despair Janet turned away. She was dismayed that her husband should so utterly fail in worthiness.

"Butler," she began, ending the pause, "don't be rude; try to be big. Whatever the trouble between us in the last day or so has been, let's—"

Nervously, irritably he cut her short. "The trouble between us in the last day or so," he caught up.

"That's easy. You've made a damned fool out of me."

"How, Butler? At the meeting?" and she sidled her chair around to face him more squarely.

"Why, certainly,—rushing out that way."

"But, don't you understand?" said Janet, bending forward and stretching an appeasing hand toward him. "I was frightened—frightened for you. I simply went to Mother as fast as I could."

"'Went to Mother as fast as I could,' " he mimicked, and added: "You talk like a child! And then it was just as bad coming to me and trying to make me justify myself. How do you suppose any one could stand up against a beast like Harsen?"

"Well, I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings. But let's put all that aside now, forget it, and see what's to be done!"

"Forget it? Oh, I was willing enough to forget. It's you that wouldn't. Last evening, as soon as we met, I was all for forgetting. I didn't want to quarrel with you. I wasn't going to hash over a lot of stuff that I couldn't have made you understand, but you were the one who had to make a quarrel out of the whole affair."

"But I thought you might apologize or explain?" she returned, half-questioningly.

"Oh, what of it?" he cried, with a careless toss of his hand. "Everything's so messed up that a fellow can't tell where to begin."

Janet saw that his nerves were raw and his mind distracted. The mother instinct which he sometimes

evoked killed any of the girl's bitterness then. He seemed all snarled and twisted out of shape.

"Well, there's just one place to begin," she said soothingly. "With Harsen."

There was a pause. Butler regarded her from beneath dark lids. Finally he asked in a slightly modified voice: "How much of this pretty situation unfolded here tonight do you think you really understand?"

"I understand," she said carefully, "that if we don't get rid of Harsen we're likely to lose everything we have in the world, and Mother's money, too."

"Very well, then," he replied; "do you know what getting rid of Harsen means?"

"Not precisely."

"I'll tell you." Butler got up, took a nervous turn across the floor, and stopping by the table, lifted the lid of the brass cigarette box. He fingered for a cigarette, and looking straight over at Janet, snapped the lid shut sharply as he shot at her:

"Money!"

At the word she sickened weakly and in silence watched him light his cigarette, toss the burnt match into the fire, and resume his chair.

"Well?" she questioned.

"Well, Harsen has got the stock—forty per cent. of it. If I simply put him out he'll kick up an awful row in the courts. I've got to buy him out, and he wants face value and that means money. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," nodded Janet, and then imploringly added, "and now don't you see how much better it is to talk quietly?"

"Don't be too previous about that," said Butler, with a miserable laugh, "I haven't come to the point yet."

With an aggravating deliberation totally alien to him he went on, his gaze upon the ceiling: "Well, money's scarce. I can't get it from the banks. I'm not known—have no particular pull or credit. That means that we'll have to borrow it. I said there was one thing to be done. That's it—borrow!"

Janet's eyes dimmed with trouble. "And as I said before," took up Butler, leaning forward, his cigarette trembling in his fingers, his mouth unpleasantly twisted, "I think you ought to do it."

"Oh, Butler," she cried involuntarily and turned away.

"What's the matter?" he demanded harshly. "Aren't you going to stand by me?"

"Yes—yes, I'll stand by you," she declared, throwing a beseeching arm toward him. "It's not that—it's you. You're not yourself, you're—"

"Well, maybe I'm not," answered Butler shortly, and got to his feet again. "That's neither here nor there. That damned Harsen has been driving me mad. But we've got to have money and there's just one person to let us have it!"

"Who?" asked Janet almost in a whisper and with a sudden comprehension looked fearsomely at him over

her shoulder. He was pacing the floor and drawing upon his cigarette in short, agitated puffs.

"The Tremonts," he said casually, not pausing in his restless march.

"Oh," breathed Janet, and sank together in her chair.

She was not conscious of precisely when he ceased walking. Presently she found him standing above her. "Don't look like that," he gasped, "I haven't asked you to commit a crime."

"Oh, I know you haven't," she replied, covering her eyes. "It isn't that."

"Well, what is it, then?"

She dared not at that moment tell him of the vain appeal for money which she had already made to Martha and John, and which to spare him she had kept secret from him. Horror filled her at the vision of his face should he learn the precise part he had played at their child's party before two of his guests. That kindness and protection had been the motive of her concealment somehow seemed of small avail now. Janet hesitated over her reply. She was still hesitating when Butler abruptly turned on his heel.

"I thought so," he said, with a sneer.

"Thought what, Butler?"

"It's what I suspected yesterday. Saw it when we were walking down the street—knew it even before then. Sure enough I was right. It's clear now."

She looked up at him with honest bewilderment. He was leaning upon the table, his fingers straining at the

edge and searching her features with a glance that had no trace of compassion. "Yes, it's clear enough now," and his voice was rough with subdued feeling. "And that's been a big part of my quarrel. It's just like one of you women. Let a man make one mistake and he's done for with you. But I'm not going to let you slip out. Your confidence got me into this business and your confidence has got to see me through. Whether you have confidence now or not doesn't matter. You'll have to pretend you have. I've a right to it." And he shot his jaw in emphasis of the last words.

Janet stared, aghast, and, as she continued to meet Butler's eyes, her lips trembled and she threatened to lose self-control in tears. Nor could she quite measure her reply; she had not been prepared for this turn.

"Why, Butler, I have confidence in you." As she uttered the sentence she reflected that really she had. That confidence of hers may have been seriously impaired—as much that evening as in Butler's office—but it was not altogether gone. She had not admitted to herself that her husband had not the talent to succeed. She had come perilously near the line, but never yet taken the full step. Butler met Janet's admission with a jeer.

"Then why all this fuss—these tragic looks?" he demanded.

"Oh, Butler,—not Martha and John? Some one else," Janet pleaded.

"That's what you said once before. I tell you there is no one else," he asserted. "John's plenty of money.

He'd never know that what we need was out of his bank account."

The girl rose and walked to the mantelpiece. She rested her weary head upon it and in silence looked into the dimming embers. She heard Butler resume his roving of the floor. Janet wondered if she could risk telling him that she knew that no help could be secured from her sister and brother-in-law.

"Well?" he prodded her presently from across the room.

Still she had no reply that she dared trust. Her husband's next words suggested a possible escape.

"I suppose you think I ought to go myself?" he asked bitterly.

Before Janet faced about she reflected that she could humble herself before Martha and implore silence concerning the appeals which she herself had already made. Even as the thought came to her she was shocked by all that it signified; a far cry, indeed, from the ideal of what her marriage was to have been! But she believed she had come in such a variety of respects to a dangerous pass in life that she did not falter long.

"Why, yes," she managed with an ingenuousness that amazed her. "Of course you *could* do that, couldn't you?"

"Could I?" he asked, coming to a stop and his voice rising. Janet paused before she sat down.

"Yes—couldn't you?" Her brows were lifted and she spoke quietly.

Butler waited a terrible second before he hurled at her: "No."

In alarm Janet took breath and dropped to the edge of her chair.

"Why?"

"Why?" he echoed, wrestling with anger. "I'll tell you why. It's because—"

Janet knew that a shock was coming and found herself gripping the arm-rest.

"Because," went on Butler, stepping nearer to her, "I've been."

The girl's heart contracted ominously. Surprise and dismay held her rigid and she stared blankly, with parted lips, up to the man who was standing pitilessly above her.

"You've been?" she gasped.

"Well, is that so awful?" Butler demanded.

She blinked. "No—I suppose not. When?"

"Yesterday," and he moved off as if to let her take in the fact, adding, "After I left you."

Janet fell back in her chair and inquired timidly:

"Well, what did they say, Butler?"

Again he stood above her. "They said," he replied, "that there was only one basis upon which they would consider putting up money."

"Yes?"

"You!"

Once more Janet was erect. "I don't understand! Me?"

"Exactly. It may have been only an excuse. I'm not sure. Anyhow, he said he would not think of it except as a family affair, and that means you." He

hesitated a second before he demanded huskily, "And, now will you go?"

Janet's perplexed eyes fell. "What did you say to them, Butler?" she evaded.

"Oh, I told them," he replied, as if the matter were of small consequence, and Janet's covert glance went with him as he wandered off across the room, "that I had a nice little business, that things were getting safely under way, that I didn't think Harsen was much of an addition, the sort of stuff I naturally would tell him," he concluded, with a generous wave of his hand.

The girl was limp. Her husband had repeated, redoubled, the galling farce of his quest for capital. What knowing grins there must have been in the Tremont home! Her fear now, however, was greater than her shame. She kept her eyes from Butler's as he once more confronted her.

"Now will you go to the Tremonts?"

Again the girl hesitated.

"I knew it," he jeered as he flung himself in his chair and sprawled his great length, eyeing her. "I knew, no matter what you said, that your faith in me was gone. I knew it yesterday." Janet, without looking at him, raised an agonised hand. "Oh, don't deny it. If you believed in me you'd stand by me now and go. You talk about 'ourselves.'" He closed his jaws before he dealt the next blow: "From now on, my dear lady, it's 'each other.' Not in a thousand years will I forget this!"

"Don't, Butler, don't!" cried Janet, covering her eyes.

There was silence. Slowly she turned about and looked at him. His head was upon the back of the chair and his face beneath the table light was grey and tired.

"It's all very nice when a fellow is somewhere near the top of the wave, isn't it?" he observed. Janet sprang up.

"Oh, Butler, I'll go! I'll go!"

Anything at that instant had seemed more bearable than Butler's contemptuous, deep-rooted anger—even the cheapening duplicity which by her promise she had imposed upon herself. She was considering this as she walked a short way down the room.

"You say you'll go. Very good! But why—why, will you tell me—all this fuss? You're beyond me!"

He was making it doubly hard; to appease him, to check his ugliest words must she not only trick him but flatly, face to face, lie to him and fabricate some reason as an excuse for her hesitation? It seemed to her that she could not, no matter how ruinous the price, bring herself to that. She wondered why he was so insistent—why he did not accept her promise and permit the wretched discussion to cease. Did he wish to pry further into the question of her confidence in him and make her declare herself again and more definitely? Was it his outraged pride, his strange estimate of what was his due, which kept him at her? As she sat down he prodded her again and more impatiently. Still she did not answer but, her whole inner being in a torture of agitation, stared into the fire.

What next occurred remained forever with Janet as a grim memory and she often reckoned the brief moment which followed as a major turning point of her life. Instincts, not thoughts, she realised at the time, dictated her part.

She was watching, almost unseeingly, a small vagrant brand within the hearth. It was shooting spasmodically tiny jets of flame; all else seemed ashes.

"Well?" came to her petulantly from Butler, who was still sprawled in his chair, and just at the second a devouring thought leaped to existence in the girl's mind; it took violent possession of her; she must be above the unworthiness of tricks and subterfuge with her husband.

"Won't you answer me?"

She turned to him now and for a dispassionate moment met his gaze.

"Butler," she said, and felt in that instant her power, "I'll tell you why I didn't want to go to Martha and John."

"Well, why?" He did not move; merely raised his cigarette to his mouth and studied her.

The girl did not hesitate. In a tone of singular evenness and without swerving her glance, she replied:

"Because while you were away—I went."

"For money?" And she nodded.

Janet held herself steady while all the demons of understanding and of pride and wrath rushed into his worn face. With a bound he sprang up. Involuntarily she twisted herself sharply and half-crouched back into

her chair. He stopped close to the table, a little way from her.

Janet held her breath and looked up to her husband. The salvation of her very soul seemed balanced in his quivering lips. It was with a shudder, breaking the tautness of her slim, young body, that she heard him speak.

"Before you're through," he roared, and she knew that he was seizing up the book at his hand, "I believe you'll ruin me yet."

In a red flash the book went to the level of his shoulders. "By God, you're the worst sort of creature that crawls this earth." The book crashed down. "That's what you are."

Janet blinded her eyes against his face, and when an instant later he spoke it was in a tone more terrible because it was more controlled. "A good woman and a fool," he concluded.

Janet was conscious that he lingered a brief second surveying her from his distance. Then she heard him cross the floor and mount the stairs. She opened her eyes to a room which seemed preternaturally bright. And, as she lay still, staring at the four dangling chains of the electric lamp, she marked her husband's liberate, heavy-heeled footfalls above.

He entered their bedchamber and for a dozen steps moved about. Then he went out and down the hall to the little room at the end, just opposite where the baby slept. The door closed quietly.

CHAPTER XIII

JULIAN POWELL'S NEW MOTOR

AND now there began in Janet's career a period the like of which she had never pictured as a possible experience. She entered upon the dull, drab existence of an estranged wife, tortured at the same time by self-reproach, dread, and a paralysing uncertainty. It was a period of tears and prayers, of soul-searchings and high resolves, of flaming bursts of anger, of nerveless inactivity. She came to have good days and bad days; days when the promise of life brightened and when she believed she had reached a decision by which she could grip hold of her situation again; days when cold terror contracted her heart and her smallest courage oozed away. She never discovered how she endured the sickening round of her weeks.

During this period there was the memory of a moment—or the small part of one—which returned to her many times. Often it provoked a forlorn smile; sometimes it made her search blinking for her handkerchief to cry. It was of herself upon a day of earliest spring two years before. Clinging to Butler's arm she had just passed out from the rich gloom of the church and paused at the head of the greyish-white steps, facing a lively, unseasonably soft sunshine. A

fresh wind beat her wedding veil against her hot cheek. For an instant they hesitated, blinking in the vivid light, and in that instant, as they stood there, it had seemed to the girl that at last life had begun. All the world had been before her. Anything and everything was possible. A great buoyant wave of sound from beyond the chancel had rolled up behind them and wafted them on. She had gathered her train a little higher and, clutching tighter Butler's arm, hurried down the roped-in, carpeted path to the automobile.

Now all the world seemed decidedly not before her; a good deal of it, the best of it, she was sure, was behind her. For the first time in her life she believed that all things were not possible, that there were doors that were closed against her. This thought was disheartening in itself, and doubly so when she viewed her own situation and perceived how tragically many and vitally important were the doors which apparently had shut with a bang. In seeking to make her life she feared that she had ruined it. Gradually, in a large measure, she began to blame herself. She should never have flown in the face of Winter's advice and in cavalier fashion taken her legacy in her own hands. She should have been warned by the consternation of the Tremonts when she told them the business venture. It had not been right for her to force Butler to the enterprise against his unwillingness to go. Most of all, she should never have kept the smallest secret from him or attempted the smallest part in his affairs. Often at night in her bed she writhed at the picture of the

girl she had been, and cried out to herself that if she had not been a fool she would now be spared the vision of that grim figure stalking through the shadows of the hall to the lonely room at the end; would not start from dreams of an olive-skinned, dancing-eyed woman who, with bare flesh and an insidiously wicked perfume, made her challenge to men; would not tremble beneath the giant-like club of ruin which Harsen seemed to hold over her head.

Janet believed that she herself understood precisely how she had come to commit each of her blunders. She could cite flock upon flock of excuses. But that did not seem to do much good. No one else, particularly her husband, apparently understood, and in her silent hours she passionately seized upon the lesson that others never did understand. It was deeds, not motives, that revolved the universe. And her deeds had been stupendous follies.

No one could have been more unhappy than Janet during this period. Nearly all the currents of her days; her estrangement from Butler, the menace of Lotta Reynolds, her anxiety for the future, the unpaid obligation to her mother, the break with John and Martha Tremont—all mighty rivers in themselves—seemed to flow to one stream of her great unhappiness. Nor did the stream apparently have any outlet. She used to hurl herself through the springtime woods, over walls, struggling with her problems, seeking answers to the conundrums of her existence, trying to determine what to do.

There was one conclusion she reached early and definitely—that she knew nothing of the psychology and inner workings of Butler Pierce, and probably never had known anything. Evidently, she told herself, for two years she had been living in a house with a man whom she had suddenly found was a stranger. By his acts he daily denied all that she had believed him and daily affirmed traits of character which she had never known existed. She had thought him kind; he was proving himself unjustly, persistently, outrageously cruel. She had thought him home-loving and sober-minded: night after night he was away, frankly seeking the gaieties of the town. Most of all she had sworn by his abiding love for her: now she seemed of only the smallest moment to him and she was convinced that any love he may have had for her was gone.

Looking backward, she remembered how, at the end of a heady courtship, they had seemed literally to collapse, flushed, into each other's arms. A trifle more than two years had passed; some sudden thing had happened, and that love which had seemed more enduring than life was destroyed. She could not understand just why. Foolish as she may have been, there was nothing in her conduct, she felt, to justify his extremes nor to explain the death, almost in a day, of the fiery, rapturous affection that had been between them. And his capacity not only for an indifference which amounted to cruelty but for a sustained, week-in and week-out attitude of frigid reserve seemed to her as unmerited as it was unbelievable. She could read in

her own behaviour no answers, and her husband and his new ways were a heartrending mystery.

Without delay he had established and forced upon Janet a strangling relation of formal, arm's-length politeness which took into account that life, whatever it amounted to, must somehow be lived. Through many evenings they sat together—Butler, grave and cool, ready, at a word, to lay aside his newspaper and fetch Janet's book from upstairs; and Janet, heart-sick and palpitating, trying not to fly from the room. At these times generally they had nothing more vital to say to each other than that the railroad schedule had been changed or that the suffrage meeting would be held on Friday. There were a great many other evenings when he did not come home until late and when the girl would wait up for him, and often, to escape her thoughts, make none too urgent questions to delay the wearied maid's progress to bed.

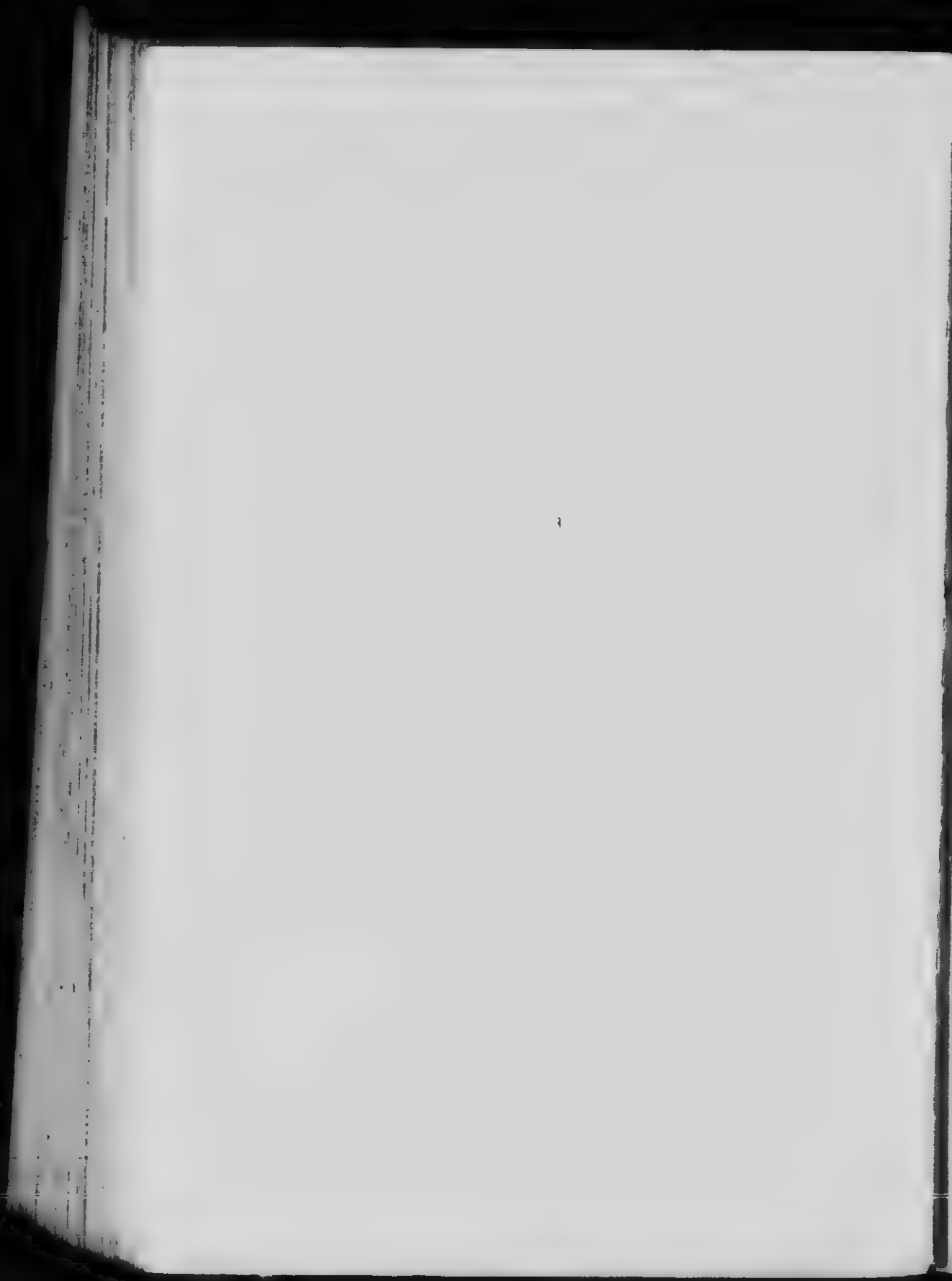
Hours came when she vehemently declared that she would take her child and leave Butler. At other moments she resolved to confront him and force matters to an issue. But she did neither, and unreckoned stretches of close-knit reflection upon what she would do were not infrequently terminated by Butler on the wire to make the calm, cool announcement that he would not be home to dinner that night. Invariably he would be careful to state at what restaurant and with whom he was dining; also, he was equally precise concerning the train by which he would return; and he never failed to take it. For this unsolicited information and un-

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Even as Butler went up the steps she knew that she would
not do what he had asked



failing adherence to schedule Janet would find herself grateful, and all through the slow-ticking evening alone would hate herself for her gratitude.

Only once—and this was in March—did Butler report himself as planning to dine with Lotta Reynolds.

"It's a large crowd," he volunteered in addition. "I was asked by one of the men—a Mr. Grierson. He's giving the party."

As usual, Janet waited up. When Butler's hack rattled to the door shortly after twelve o'clock she pretended to be reading and did not lay her book face down upon her lap until he had advanced well into the room. She knew that under the practice of his ghastly but thoroughly practical *modus vivendi* he would say something. He came over by the table and inquired if there had been letters for him. She replied that there had not.

"It's late," he said, consulting his watch. "I think I'll go up," and he started for the stairs.

"Did you have a nice time?" The girl had been powerless to resist the question.

"Very!" answered Butler over his shoulder. "And, oh yes!" He paused, a hand on the newel-post. "Lotta Reynolds asked me to remind you to go and get the street dress you left there."

Janet took up her book and lowered her eyes to it. "Oh, certainly," she managed casually. "I must."

Even as Butler went up the steps she knew that she would not do what he had asked. For nearly three months she had been seeking courage either to go and

get the dress herself or to ask Butler to get it for her. Both courses had somehow seemed impossible.

Nevertheless, she had an active curiosity concerning Lotta and her doings. This curiosity, though, remained unsatisfied because she was unable to brave direct inquiries of Butler, and he volunteered nothing. So Janet used to try small, side-shot questions like:

"Who was that Mr. Grierson who gave the party the other night?"

"A rich chap. A friend of Winter's, I believe."

She never got much further than that, and meanwhile was beset with an anxiety of another kind. She could learn nothing of her husband's business, how it was progressing, what the future seemed to promise, especially regarding Mrs. Fielding's loan, and most particularly, what Butler was doing to rid himself of his ill-chosen partner. Over his activities in those hours between nine and five he had pulled a shroud of silence which the girl knew she would not be able to lift even if she tried. She was certain that at the merest questions about his affairs Butler would end the subject by a blasting look and leave the room. If there was one principle in their new relations more than another that he had made clear it was that he would not, except under extraordinary circumstances, talk business with her. And she was left in perplexity, knowing only that Pierce & Harsen continued to be the name of the firm, and that an evil genius of the Pierce family still occupied one of the blue-tinted offices that she herself had fitted with such eager confidence.

There were moments of deeper depression when she sometimes wondered if they would assuredly be able to meet their rent. Butler, however, continued to hand her a check for the household and her own expenses. This was as he had done before, save that now he would add sternly that the allotted amount must not be exceeded. This frightened Janet a little, and because she feared to excite further her husband's wrath, she addressed herself with a new attention to her domestic management. For several months she tried a complicated system of her own devising. But her distracted mind could never make her ledger balance, and somehow her estimates always went askew. Finally, upon a day when it occurred to her that she was making this plodding effort for a man who had not kissed her in a dozen weeks, she got up and tossed her figures indignantly into the fire. Nevertheless, she did not exceed the amount of Butler's check, and the checks came regularly and the rent was paid.

Even then, though she continued to be anxious and dwell a great deal upon the matter of Mrs. Fielding's loan and upon Butler's chances for success and upon the future. She had no conviction as to where she was coming to in life. Her earlier vision of an existence conducted on the broadest and fullest terms was greatly dimmed. There was no likelihood, she felt, that they would ever be rich; whether they would fall into the slough of absolute failure she did not know. It seemed difficult to form a certain judgment concerning Butler's chances for success. Many of the conclusions

forced upon her by the meeting to which Winter had summoned her had been shaken by the disclosure of Harsen's brutal, overpowering methods. On the other hand, those same conclusions had seemed to find confirmation in her husband's manner during the evening interview with the lawyer in their home. But again, Janet felt, the situation would have been difficult for any man, and their visitor had not made Butler's part easier by smoothing a single rough edge. The fact was she did not know what was her husband's basic talent for affairs nor whether he was likely to win material prizes in the world. But what difference did it make? she asked herself; existence was poisoned and more than money was needed to purify it. And so it happened that at this time her once vaulting, soul-lacerating ambition for one kind of success was much in abeyance and her chief concern became that no calamity overtake her husband in the mysterious, barred regions of the business world that would force them to a still lower scale of living or long delay the payment of Mrs. Fielding.

To discharge the Fielding loan was day by day unquestionably one of Janet's most active desires. Upon visit after visit to her mother she could not help feeling the thing between them, the more so, the girl believed, because her mother never referred to it. She did not know whether she was grateful to Mrs. Fielding or not for her obvious evasion of the subject. Janet understood her mother's motive; it was to spare her daughter's pride, grossly injured by the enforced

abandonment of her youthful principle of conduct in regard to money. But understanding made the visits no easier and at even the most casual question from Mrs. Fielding about the development of the business or whether Butler were overworked there would be strain.

More than once Janet was on the point of asking Butler what prospects there were for paying the debt. But much time passed before she did, and meanwhile there did not seem any one else to whom she could turn.

In other circumstances it might have been conceivable that she appeal for light to John Tremont, but her brother-in-law was not a possibility now. Janet's relation with him and with Martha was in a like muddle with other of her affairs. The girl still ardently believed that her sister and her sister's husband had shown themselves wanting in the finest, most loyal feeling when they had turned deaf ears to her cry of distress. That alone would have been enough to hold her apart from them, but there was added the writhing shame of Butler's boasts and later equally vain appeal. Altogether Janet was sure that there could not be again anything more than formal exchanges between herself and the Tremonts. She would weep over this sometimes, but she scarcely even considered trying to enlist John's advice.

There was still another reason which would keep her from seeking her brother-in-law's aid. She was in a state of quivering sensitiveness, which did not abate for months, over her breach with Butler. It seemed to her unendurable that others should learn or perceive the

horrible thing which her proudly-boasted marriage had become. There was no use in going to any one for help unless she asked questions, and of a kind which Butler obviously enough was the one person to answer. Any discussion of the business problem, she was sure, would lead around to the disclosure of the blight which had come upon their home. And no necessity could overcome her sense of shame sufficiently to permit her to disclose that tragedy.

This same feeling restrained her in other ways. Only rarely were guests invited to their house. It was perfectly impossible for her and Butler to gloss their relation even for an evening, so as to conceal the change; and, moreover, when any one did come, Janet often found herself too dispirited to give herself out. Upon occasions Butler brought Julian. He talked cheerily and guided his topics with a tactful care, and when he was together with them both seemed to take the attitude that he had applied on one occasion his particular panacea for the differences in the Pierce family, and that, as it had apparently not been efficacious, all he could do was to sit by and wait.

But Janet continuously suspected that this would not be Julian's attitude with her if just they two found themselves together. Warned by the way in which she sometimes caught him looking at her, she was certain that upon the score of old friendship and interest, he would be glad to explore further into her unhappiness.

The issue, however, did not arise for a long time because it chanced that Butler was always with them.

When it did arise, it grew out of an event which did not impress Janet, at first, as connected in any way with her own immediate existence.

Early in June Powell was elected secretary of the Excelsior Trust Company. Toward the end of a Saturday afternoon he motored out to tell the news. Engulfed in a deep wicker chair, Janet was sitting in a corner of the lawn. Soft, restful shadows lay across the sweet-smelling, close-cropped grass. Above was a placid sky, with depths of untold blueness. The girl held a book. One leg crossed the other; her slim, black-stockinged ankle and her narrow, bright-slippered foot were as motionless as the flaming rhododendron bushes at her back. The blouse she wore left bare her throat. There was a wistful droop to her shoulders, but its appeal was no longer the appeal of mere girlhood. Around her neck was the thread of a gold locket chain. With one hand she was gently playing with this.

Janet's eyes were following the type lines of her book, but she was not reading. She was thinking, and her thoughts ran to the general purport that if her husband were really the sort of person she had believed him, his ideals would now prompt him to make his life more noble; in which event he would end the quarrel in the Pierce family and . . . At a sound from down the driveway she lifted her eyes. An unfamiliar car was rounding the bend in its climb up the hill, but she recognized the trim, lean-featured individual, in the exact middle of the rear seat, as Julian Powell.

She was glad he had come; glad Butler was not at

home; glad at the prospect of escape from herself. There might be a mild contest with Julian, and when she recalled the calm, sure-footed confidence with which her friend invariably pursued his ends she wondered precisely how she should be able to manage him. With the hope that he would let her play at abstractions and commonplaces for a while with him, she waved an arm, lustrous in the afternoon light, to welcome him.

"But the new car, Julian?" she questioned, as, hat in hand and a cane hooked over the sleeve of a snug-waisted blue serge suit, he made a bow before her. "Does this also signify some grand new event?"

"It does," he laughed, and drew up a chair. He sat down and paused, looking at the girl. She threw him a bright, friendly smile of inquiry. He smiled back and waited a brief moment longer before he spoke.

"My dear Janet," he eventually said, "that car marks a most important event—my accession to dignity."

He stopped there, cryptically. The girl looked over at the machine. From the sedate upholstery of the tonneau to the visored cap of the immobile chauffeur the new car expressed quiet opulence.

"That," Julian added, pointing with his stick, "is the worthy successor of that madcap, slouchy racing thing I had. I've quit being a broker."

He told her his news, faint amusement in his eyes, as if the matter were not to be taken too seriously, and in a tone clear and controlled. What it came to was that the trust company secretaryship had been offered

to him and he had decided to sell his partnership interest and accept. His election had followed.

"Money? Well, there's not so much immediately," he explained depreciatingly. "But I've made up my mind that I want to go in a little for what I call dignity. Sounds rather formidable, doesn't it? Well, it's not. I think all I mean is that I want to cut out a good deal of this cheap, fake life—dining and wining and toadying to a lot of people whom I don't care a snap for just because they happen to be customers or possible customers. Thank heaven, I'm at a point where I can afford to give it up and get out of all that. It was nasty."

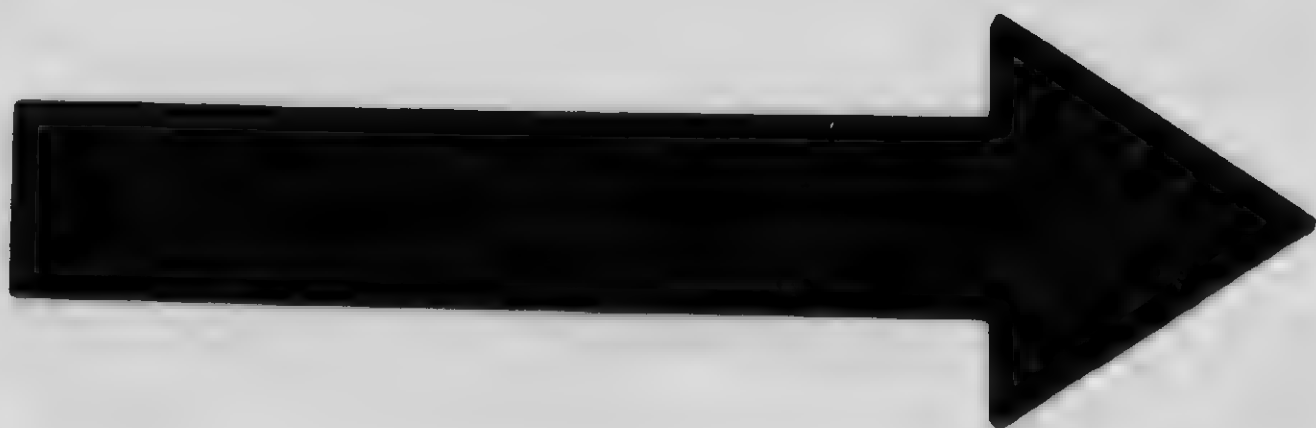
Even as Janet made her congratulations a chance remark of Martha Tremont's returned to her. It was something disparaging about Julian's business and his methods—she did not clearly remember. But whatever it was, Powell was getting that particular kink out of his life—making his life finer.

"Oh, it's splendid, Julian," she exclaimed. "I'm proud of you." And she knew that she had never thought so well of him nor held him in warmer regard than she did then. "Yes, Julian, I'm really proud of you," she added, tricked by enthusiasm out of herself, "as proud as I can be."

"Why proud?" he asked. "To be secretary isn't so much."

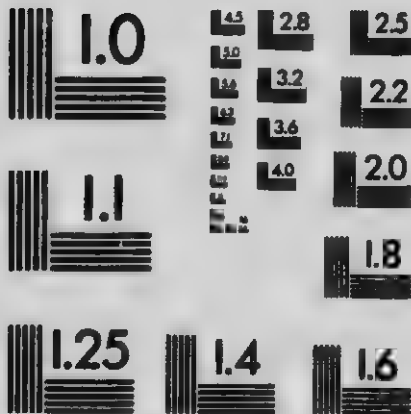
"Oh, it's not that. It's your wanting to get out of that other thing."

"I see," he mused, tapping at the heel of his boot.



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"You are a little surprised at my wanting to. Is that it?"

"No, I think I like what you've done because it shows—" She laughed. "Well, because it shows you've a soul."

"Certainly I've a soul," he protested good-humouredly, "and, like every other little soul in the universe, it's trying for its particular kind of perfection—the kind it sees. Didn't you think I had a soul?"

"Don't be absurd," Janet abjured. "Of course I knew you had a soul. All I meant was that I'm glad that you had the courage of your vision—of the thing you saw as the most perfect."

She nodded renewed approval over to him and with a certain delight took in the impression of cheerful and intelligent indolence he gave as, without the hint of a slouch, he lolled back into the depths of his chair. He was watching her with half-closed grey eyes in which alertness, amusement, and half a challenge all were. Somehow it occurred to her to ask about Lotta Reynolds, but she didn't; the sun-tinted, rolling countryside reached too serenely out before her. She continued watching him and fingering languidly at the thread of her gold chain, and let the unstrained, friendly silence go on. Only the reflective tapping of Julian's stick broke the pleasant quietness until, without moving, he asked:

"Have you?" Her thoughts had idled away and she tried to bring them back.

"Have I what?"

"The courage of your vision."

Janet sought to warn him with a frown. "Oh, I try to have," she said, "but, remember—we were discussing you."

He laughed softly. She was almost disarmed into a smile. Once more she frowned; again he laughed.

"You try, eh?" She did not reply, but made occasion to drop her book on the grass beside her. "Need any help?" he inquired casually. His thin, teasing smile seemed to say that he realised perfectly that he was trespassing, but did not care, and it really didn't matter, anyhow. But Janet was firm.

"No—I don't need help," she said, with a shake of her head.

"You must let me know if you do."

"I shall," she said a little distantly, "if I do."

"But you won't—I know."

"How?"

"Because you haven't," he said, without changing his low, metallic tone and without ceasing the gentle beat of his cane. He was less easily managed than she had believed.

"I haven't needed help," she replied coolly. Again Powell laughed.

"Do you now?"

"No."

"I admire your spirit."

"Do you?"

"Yes—for a girl who wanted everything in sight."

"But I have everything in sight," she affirmed, and

could not help shimmering him a smile at her own preposterousness.

"Then you've achieved perfection?"

"Perhaps!"

"How horrible!"

"Not at all."

"You must be awfully bored."

"I'm not," she answered, and momentarily she thought she had discouraged him. "But why bored?"

"Nothing to fight for—nothing to go after. Life is a struggle," he drawled.

"How disheartening!" said Janet quizzically.

"Not so disheartening as if you killed life with perfection."

"Aren't you the one who is likely to do that at your present rate of progress?" she teased.

"Me? No!" and he swished his stick through the air. "How's Butler?"

"Oh, working hard," she returned.

"I haven't seen him lately."

"He's working hard," the girl repeated.

"Is that all?" Her heart contracted, but she did not lose a certain vague amusement.

"Isn't that enough?"

"There's more than that wrong," pronounced Powell conclusively. The instinct to hide to the last the disgraceful mess of her relations with Butler dictated her reply.

"Oh, he has a vile partner," she hastened to say.

"Harsen, eh?"

"Yes—Harsen," Janet nodded.

"What's the trouble?"

"Oh, he's terrible," was all that she would allow herself to say.

"Well, where do you come in?" inquired Julian, with mystifying inconsequence. She thought she sensed his meaning; that Harsen did not mean unhappiness for her.

"Me? I don't come in at all," she assured him.

"I thought not," he snapped, and now he leaned forward, his cane between his knees, thoughtfully poking the ground. "What it all comes to is this: You're a nice little person who is viewing existence with a very well-cheated eye. You thought that the earth and the fulness thereof was going to be yours and you had no mind for skittles."

He said no more, but lifted his head and studied her closely. She toyed again at the slender chain at her breast, reflecting how far afield Julian was and how little any one else ever understood what really went on in the inner sanctuaries of a marriage. Finally, she said, in a tone which only Julian's steady, completely kindly eyes kept from being aloof and severe: "You forget, Julian, that some things do not remain always of great importance."

"Well, money's important to you," he thrust back. "It isn't necessary for you and me to go into that! It seems to me that you're awfully futile today. But never mind. We'll keep to Butler. What's the matter

with him? He's a changed person. He's packing some kind of a load on his back."

"I've told you—it's Harsen," Janet again insisted.

"You say he's terrible. Why doesn't Butler get rid of him?"

"I don't know," Janet replied, firm in her resolution.

"Do you want Butler to get rid of him?"

"I want what Butler wants."

"What does Butler want?"

A phrase out of the past leaped to the girl's mind—Harsen's words when she had asked him over the telephone why her husband had gone on his sudden and fateful trip West. She smiled as she delivered her reply:

"Hadn't you better ask Butler that?"

Julian stopped poking with his stick and looked at her with some surprise. This pleased Janet. There was a very faint twinkle of amusement as she met Powell's perplexed stare. She felt her advantage and repeated:

"Now, really, don't you think so, Julian?"

He did not speak. Her mind went back over their talk. She glanced again at Julian's baffled features. Something impelled her to fall back in her chair with a soft laugh. At that Julian also laughed and fell back in his chair. They sat there in the most tender hour of a summer's evening looking into each other's eyes and chuckling over the contest they had played.

"I surrender," said Julian presently, and checking

his smile leaned forward again. "But be serious. I'd like awfully to see you a little happier. Would you be if I helped Butler get rid of Harsen? Say so and I'll try." He paused and regarded her searchingly. "Now, don't be absurd!" he ended.

He hung upon her answer. It was absurd to go to extremes; she remembered Winter's talk, her mother's loan, but more especially the pinched suffering she had seen in Butler's eyes. With a flash of spirit, as of old, she turned eagerly to him. "Why, yes, Julian," she said, "I should be."

As she uttered the words one lesson of her silent and tortured hours returned to her and the spark was dead. But Julian was on his feet.

"Very well, then," he said, with decision. "Tell Butler to look me up."

Thoughtful, she remained seated, her eyes lowered. She dared not take the message to her husband. Julian, twirling his cane, waited, and she knew he was studying her.

"Or better yet," he said quietly, "say nothing. I'll hunt up Butler."

"Oh yes." Janet looked up brightly. "That would be better, wouldn't it?"

And shortly thereafter, Butler, returning home late one night, had paused on his way to bed to inform her, with a certain challenging insolence, as if to throw his achievement in her face, that he had bought out Harsen.

It was the first reference to his business affairs that her husband had made since their quarrel, and Janet,

finding a courage which she had not had for a long time, improved the occasion.

"That means, I suppose," she said, pretending to read the headlines of an evening paper he had tossed upon the table, "that you can pay mother soon."

"Am I being dunned for that already?" he inquired.

"No, but I should like to know."

"Well, then," he had rejoined, "soon."

"How soon?"

"Soon." And he had gone upstairs.

CHAPTER XIV

SUMMER

JANET had no idea what her husband had meant in saying that Mrs. Fielding's loan could be discharged "soon." So far as she knew he may have meant a week; he may have meant six months. For ten days she puzzled this conundrum and had finally concluded that for the present at least she would make no further inquiries and would merely let the matter rest, when the mortification and shame of a chance encounter emboldened her to speak.

Upon a day near mid-June she was returning to Tuckerton and had just found herself with a grilled iron gate of the railroad station closed against her rush for the daytime train. That meant an hour's wait. Dispiritedly she sought the station restaurant and was no sooner comfortably in her seat than her eye picked up at an adjoining table the lean and bony form of Mr. Theron Styce. Her father's old partner replied to her nod by rising, bringing over without formality his bowl of crackers and milk and joining her. He was a stooped, nervous man, with a white mustache and bright, button-like, undersized eyes.

"How's your ma, Janet?" he began, as with quick movements he broke a fresh cracker into his milk.

"Mother's well—very well," she replied, always a little amused at the abrupt Mr. Styce.

"That's good. How's your husband?" He was now bending comfortably over the business of despatching his lunch.

"Very well, thank you."

"Business doing well?"

"Oh yes; splendidly."

"Got Harsen out, didn't you?" Rapidly but regularly his spoon went up and down. "Good job—good business," he commented. Janet's glance was across the room.

"Had quite a bit of trouble before that, didn't ye?"

"Not that I know of," she replied.

"Oh yes, oh yes—I know—I know."

"Yes?" Janet queried.

"Yep. Heard all about it. Needed cash!"

She said nothing and examined her fingertips.

"Too bad—too bad!" he observed, and with quick and noisy strokes of his spoon he finished his crackers and milk.

"And so your poor ma had to put up, eh?" He rose and picked his check from the table. "Well, that's the way things is. Good-bye. My regards to your ma."

That was all. Mr. Styce departed, taking his mincing way to the cashier's desk at the door, leaving the girl to ask herself if Harsen's tactics could have included spreading broadcast the uncomfortable transaction with Mrs. Fielding. It was clear enough that

they had, and she felt that her husband's name and reputation were so seriously involved that she was in duty bound to speak. At dinner that evening and with some trepidation she told him of the encounter.

Playing with his coffee spoon, Butler heard her through without comment or glance, bowed gravely when she had concluded, and left the room. This angered Janet; she followed his retreating back with a hot protest almost upon her lips that she had a right to know when Mrs. Fiddling would be paid. She heard the screen door slam behind him as he went to the lawn, and determined that she would not permit her husband to put her aside in that easy, indifferent manner.

As she scraped back her chair, the maid came through the swinging door of the pantry and handed her the evening mail. By habit she glanced at it. The uppermost letter was for her. Something remotely familiar in the handwriting caused her involuntarily to halt in her pursuit. She sat down again and opened the communication.

It was written in a lively scrawl upon Tartaran's encrusted stationery and ran:

"Try, my dear, not to be too silly! No, I can't send you the dress. It's reason! As you refuse to invite me out to you, I am going to keep it until you come to me. I have a reason; I want to see you.

"LOTTA.

"P. S.—Come soon—I may move."

Janet closed her eyes and passed a hand over her tired lids. For a moment she let it rest at her temple. Then she folded the letter back into the envelope and decided that she would say no more to her husband concerning the repayment of the loan that night. Nor did she attempt to force the issue the next day nor the next; but under the inertia of her fears allowed the puzzle of what her husband had meant by "soon" to remain unsolved.

It finally solved itself. Toward the end of June that year there came a mild spell of heat, and upon an evening when Janet was downstairs, striving to read, a thin cry reached her from above.

She flew upstairs. When she had reached the boy's crib the sudden wail had ceased. He lay beneath the small coverings, unwontedly still, his eyes open. She petted his little rounded forehead for a moment and returned downstairs. Twice again in the night the child cried in that brief, startled way. The next morning she summoned the local physician, Dr. Broadbent.

"Yes, yes, you young mothers are all the same," he declared, with a deep laugh and a sly nod to Janet. "Nothing in the world wrong with your young man except a touch of stomach. Cut down on the milk and try a little barley gruel and some of this for a few days and you'll see him sprouting like a weed."

The Tuckerton practitioner sat down, and upon his bulky knee began to write a prescription. With much tugging at his moustache, he completed it and scratched off his signature.

"This always does the trick for these babies of mine," he assured Janet, handing her the slip of paper, and repeated jovially: "Yes, you young mothers! You mustn't mind if an old hand like me smiles."

"Well, I understand, then," put in Janet, "that you don't think it worth while to take him in to Dr. King?"

"Certainly not. Of course King is a great specialist, but there is no necessity of consulting him for your boy." He picked his square black visiting-case from the floor. Janet followed him downstairs. After he had gone Janet turned back into the living-room and listlessly went upstairs. For a moment he stood over the baby's crib and regarded him; there was a tired little droop to his mouth which moistened her eyes.

"What did the doctor say?" peremptorily asked Butler as he tossed the newspapers on the table that evening.

"He said the trouble amounted to nothing," Janet answered. "He quite pooh-poohed taking him to Dr. King."

"You are satisfied?" came from Butler.

"Yes, I am satisfied, I think," replied the girl dully.

"Very good," returned Butler. "Then we don't have that to worry about and pay for."

"No, I suppose not, but—" She came to a stop, thoughtful.

"But what?"

"Nothing," said the girl.

"If you're sure of that, I'll dress for dinner." And

before she had energy for a reply he had left her.

Several days later she summoned Dr. Broadbent again. There was a blueness beneath the boy's eyes and an odd new note of pain in his cry.

"You're hysterical, my dear Mrs. Pierce," he told her, with a sympathising look from beneath his bushy brows. "There is nothing wrong with your boy. In a few days he'll pick up. You mustn't become so easily alarmed. Of course these second summers are often trying—very trying. But no cause for concern—none in the world."

"Do you think we should go away—take the baby off to the mountains—perhaps the shore?" she asked anxiously, following him to the threshold.

"Why, yes—yes. A change is always desirable. Set you all up!"

"But the baby?"

"Oh, set him up, too. Excellent idea. Excellent idea—especially in the second summer."

"Do you advise it, then?" Janet put in incisively.

"Why, yes. Often gets a little warm here, you know." He laughed and nodded. "Mountain air makes 'em grow." Dr. Broadbent stowed his edge-worn case into his small, mud-spattered machine. "Good idea, Mrs. Pierce, but no cause for anxiety. How this splendid weather does keep up!"

It was when Janet broached to her husband the plan of a small cottage somewhere in bracing air as a safeguard for their child that she learned what interpretation he had chosen to put upon his own words that

Mrs. Fielding's debt would be paid "soon." She was quite sure that he would not have offered the explanation upon any issue less vital than the boy. Before he had told her she had seen him struggling.

"We can't take risks," she had declared. "It may get hot here and the boy's not well, I'm sure."

"How do you know he's not?"

"Look at him."

"I don't see anything wrong. What does Broadbent think?"

"I haven't much confidence in Dr. Broadbent," Janet had replied. "He's too off-hand."

"He's had a good practice here for twenty years," argued Butler, and then paused before the barriers of his rigid pride. Finally he surmounted them and Janet had learned that, impelled by Harsen's tactics, he had sought to protect his credit and that in order to deny the loan, the debt had been paid.

Janet experienced no elation. Any that she might have had was lost in anxiety for her boy. One result of Butler's precipitous discharge of Mrs. Fielding's obligation had been to seriously deplete his funds and render the girl's plan a hopeless impossibility. She felt that the long arm of the business venture had again reached out pitilessly to strike her still another blow. This time it threatened to find a mortally vulnerable spot, indeed, and it was with a bruised and heavy heart that she settled down for the long pull of the summer upon the knob of the Tuckerton hill.

This was early in July, and during the six weeks or

so which followed matters for Janet did not mend. Butler continued, without apparent emotion, his gnarled and twisted path. His absences in town may not have increased perhaps, but if they did, he had the same clear statements of his plans, and he made them with the same supreme indifference to Janet's feeling. Their evenings at home were not appreciably different. If anything, Butler was cooler, graver, more silent.

She knew he was carrying a heavy load. Indeed, it seemed to her that he took little pains to hide that fact. There were calm, cool nights when she would be lying in her bed, flat beneath the sheet, and staring into soft gloom, when she knew that beneath her window he was pacing interminably from one end of the lawn to the other. Now and again she would hear a match strike as he lit a fresh cigarette. It was that little noise which told her that he was keeping up his restless march. But what churning thoughts had robbed him of his peace she was not sure. They may have been of her; perhaps he wanted to end the relation between them, once and for all. Business worries may have been harassing him, or his distress may have been some deep-down battle of his own soul.

The wall of reserve between them remained unbroken. It seemed to grow during this period into an established thing and the purport of Butler's attitude was that his life was his own, that he had taken it into his own hands, and that under no circumstances would he share it with her; and, further, that whenever she got

ready to do so, she was free to do the same. He never questioned an act of hers, he never inquired about any of her comings and goings.

Somewhere in the world that lay beyond Tuckerton hill was Lotta Reynolds. But the girl knew nothing of her; her name never came into the talks with either Julian or Butler. If it had that menace might have seemed less real. But the silence and mystery of both men concerning Lotta kept the girl's fears alive. As for Mrs. Reynolds' letter, it lay irresolutely neglected in a drawer of the girl's writing-desk.

Martha and John Tremont remained equally remote. Never once did they stir to see Janet, and Janet did not stir to see them. Their relations seemed to lie cold and dead. With Mrs. Fielding it was different. Several times during these weeks the girl went to see her mother; but a new wedge had been driven, and Janet felt that her mother must be searching in vain for a reason why her daughter had not once bidden her to Tuckerton.

Julian came and went. He did not again attempt, even when he and she were alone, to probe her unhappiness, and there were only formal passages between them; so formal, indeed, that there was no mention, save once, of the transaction by which Julian had arranged to remove the yoke of Harsen from Butler's neck. Upon that one occasion, all that was spoken Janet had said. She pressed her friend's hand a little more warmly than usual and murmured an undesigned thanks. Charles Winter, she felt, was avoiding her as if she were afflicted

with disease. Still, she did not complain; she had tried him sorely.

The boy grew no worse; he grew no better. There were cool days and warm days, days when he fretted, days when he played. He did not cry again in that sudden, startled way, but there was still a thin blueness at his temples which sometimes animated Janet's alarm.

Through these weeks it seemed to the girl that all her affairs were simply hanging in a menacing balance. Harsen was out; that gave Butler his opportunity to prove his powers. Lotta was alive, somewhere, trying to cast her spell over men; over whom, Janet did not dare guess. Her husband was as distant from her as ever, but he had not forsaken her. The baby's second summer was passing in Tuckerton, but the child was not actually ill. Anything might happen; nothing might happen. Her outer world seemed to be standing breathlessly still, waiting.

But Janet's inner world was not still. When she had been compelled by circumstances to face the summer with her child upon the Tuckerton hill another epoch of her mind and her soul had arrived. It began with a new kind of bitterness; a passionate resentment, not at individuals so much as at life itself. The entire scheme of the world and the manner in which it worked, its relentlessness, its unending, remorseless chain of consequences, seemed to her outrageously unfair.

Her inheritance, her breeding, her early environment all had given her a definite body of expectations, desires, and ideals. Love, kindness, joy had ruled her

universe as they had ruled that of most girls of her station. Occasionally a scarred veteran like Winter had let fall a warning word, but for the most part every hint of the brutal forces of pride and lust against which she would have to contend had been kept from her. Thus blindfolded she had struck her blow at the world—a foolish blow, to be sure, but to the last degree of praiseworthy intent. Then the world had struck back and it had retaliated not once, but many times. It had blighted her home, all but sent her husband from her, distorted his nature, dispelled her dreams, heaped upon her one burning indignity after another, snatched away a sister's love, driven a nasty wedge into her relation with her mother and, finally, was imperiling her child. All this, with an added threat of an even wider spread circle of calamity, for her one unavoidable, unescapable error!

As weeks went by and her affairs remained at their stagnant and poisonous ebb, she sometimes believed that she could literally feel the very fibres of her being hardening. There had been hours when her pity rushed out to Butler and she could have taken his tired, troubled head into her lap to fondle and soothe him; these hours she had no more. Increasingly she thought that the spirit of forgiveness was flowing out of her blood and the gall of bitterness was flowing in. She began to see baseness where she had not seen it before. Upon any event, suspicion became the first process of her mind; fears were her constant companions, and her hope was the tasteless, negative hope that the succeeding days

would not bring a fresh catastrophe. That confiding innocence went out of her eye, taking with it its charm, and even her fair, fresh skin seemed to dull with the poison of her life.

More and more desperately she clung to her child. Out of the wreckage, her son was the one priceless possession left to her. She gave herself to him with hysterical abandon; lavished kisses upon his small, grave, uncertain lips and behind his shapely flat ears. Because it was in her nature to build dreams, she built her new dreams around him, and they were of a fine, magnificent man with love and beauty in his heart. In the boy she discovered a delicate, flower-like quality of sweetness. She read it in the gentle movements of his hands and in the quiet, dispassionate light that was in his wondering blue eyes. Often when she noted it she felt that she held in her arms the one being who was clean and pure and above the muck of the world.

And then, almost imperceptibly, a final epoch set in; another spirit, growing and ripening in those hours when she was alone with her boy. New currents and counter-currents moved across her mind. They were not tumultuous as at any earlier time, but calm and of far greater depth and power than ever before. A remaking of the girl's heart had begun. Bitternesses smouldered to regrets; ambitions turned to prayers; for beauties which had been faded new beauties arose, and then a day came when she found herself standing in the temple of her soul, garnished and put in order after its invasion of bitterness and pain.

Janet never forgot that hour when she took afresh her estimate of life. About her were the altars which had been despoiled; her faith in Butler's abiding love, in Martha Tremont's kindness, in the essential rightness of the universe; these were cold, and she was sure the fires could never be lighted again. But the flame of her hopes and dreams for her boy guided her through the darkness to another radiance which in the heat of her angers and fears had been neglected and almost snuffed out. She began to see a correlating purpose in life—a fine, noble, unifying thing to lift her above the grossness upon every hand—a guiding hand to give focus to her days.

It was that she must keep faith in herself and with herself. The core of her must be fine; the world must not be permitted to trample upon that. For that agonised moment, now months ago, when her spirit had risen above soiling trickery and the cheap subterfuge, she gave passionate thanks; it had left her at least one ideal, one unshaken belief—that, at least, she had not failed herself.

Personal nobility became a religion with her. She consecrated herself to it, and in her dread and misery and loneliness exalted this altar higher and higher, declaring even if her fortunes seemed to be toppling to ruin, even if the world was infested with unsuspected baseness and cruelty, even if one cherished dream after another had been ground to dust, there must forever remain one spotless thing—the thing that was Janet Pierce.

CHAPTER XV

A TRIP TO TOWN

JANET had almost concluded that she would go into town.

This was the last Thursday of August—a day when the world seemed to sizzle to the touch and human strength to ooze away. The night before there had been nervous shimmering runs of lightning along the rim of the murky sky but no rain, and it had been evident that more than those noiseless, teasing cinema waves on the horizon would be needed to crack the air. In the morning the sun had slipped up, bright and heartless, and was without mercy lifting its blistering course toward noon. The girl stood at the head of the stairs, leaning against the bannister rail, frowning slightly, and considering her plan.

To begin with, she told herself, it might be a long while before she would have another opportunity, so safe and favourable, to carry out a particular resolution of hers, already several weeks old. The Dalrymple girls were away for the summer and Mrs. Fielding would end her visit that evening. She did not know how much time might pass before she could again find such experienced hands, in which to leave her boy, while she made the trip which, since Monday, when her mother

had arrived, she had been postponing under the weight of other worries. And the trip had to be made, she remembered, if she were to execute that vow of her new and rearranged life to remove from herself without delay the taint of cowardice. One of the immediate acts which this involved was to go to Lotta Reynolds for her dress.

There was another reason. Without expressing the thought very clearly to herself, she knew that she desired to come back on the five-thirty train; upon it Butler was to return from his stay of several days in town. It was not so much that Janet wanted to put in a beseeching word with her husband for his conduct during the one meal of her mother's visit which, due to Mrs. Fielding's unexpected wish to delay her departure until the cooler hours of the evening, all three of them would necessarily eat together; it was rather that she knew one glimpse at Butler's face would either quicken or allay the anxiety which since Sunday had been growing with her. Besides, if anything dire had occurred he might tell her of it during the ride. The child and his condition was the only other urgent consideration and she decided, if there were no visible change in him, that she would go.

The boy lay in his crib and smiled a small, drawn-in, baby smile up to Janet as she studied him. Looking down into his quiet, patient eyes, she saw nothing new; indeed, it seemed to her that there had been nothing new to see in him all that summer; no cause for fresh alarm since the disturbing period of four or five days

when he had cried out several times in that sudden startled way which somehow had gripped the girl's breath. Never an hour since then, but she had hearkened for that frightening wail, but it had not come again. With the thickening humidity and the climbing temperature of the torrid spell, she had had an ominous sinking of the heart. The boy's crib had been moved to her room and hour after hour she had stood above it, fanning him until her wrists ached with fatigue. Now, as she anxiously regarded her son, she believed that in all likelihood the boy's frail forces would be equal to the strain. The laws of mercy and nature demanded that the heat should break soon; the thin blueness at his temples was no more marked than it had been; the tiny hollows at the side of his neck were no deeper. Leaning over, Janet once or twice thoughtfully spanned the child's wrist, kissed him abruptly on his soft, fair curls and reached a decision to make the trip.

"Mother," she began to Mrs. Fielding, whom she found seated downstairs, "I'm going into town."

"Oh no, dearest, not today," pleaded the older woman, turning heavily about in her chair.

"Yes, mother, today; I must," was all that Janet returned and made a business of moving from window to window lowering the shades. She had spoken with finality and Mrs. Fielding sighed in resignation. When, an hour or so later, Janet, in a tan-linen suit, settled herself in the train she wondered what must be in her mother's mind.

Mrs. Fielding had come on Monday afternoon out to

Tuckerton in an agitation of delight responding to Janet's telephone invitation, early that morning. Even though all reserves had not been wiped out between them, most of them had seemed to wear away. Every one of them might have disappeared had Janet felt herself able to account a little more definitely for her husband's absence. It must have struck her mother as odd, Janet reflected, that during the four days of her visit Butler's vacant chair had not been filled with a more adequate explanation. But the girl had done her best; she had told her mother all that she herself knew. That that was distressingly meagre—no more than that her husband was in town and would return Thursday—was not her fault. Janet was as much puzzled as Mrs. Fielding must be, but with the girl there was a knowledge of a small, curious succession of events which her mother did not have. This had contributed anxiety to her perplexity. Sitting in the car she recalled the mild occurrences of Sunday evening and debated again just how far they should be read together.

She and Julian Powell had been upon the grass in the middle of the lawn; Butler somewhere indoors, presumably writing letters, which he had said not even the heat could delay; above, within one of the blank windows of the second floor, the baby slept. For an hour or more Janet and Julian had been exchanging friendly, easy platitudes. His graceful length was stretched before her, his back to the house, his head upon a hand; she sat crosslegged, plucking at blades of grass. It was very dark, but a shaft of soft light from the living room

lay across them. The dead hush of the night kept their voices to a whisper. At ten o'clock Julian's car had returned. The girl heard its deep hum and turned toward the bend in the driveway. She saw the long reach of its headlamps piercing the blackness and making more and more vivid the thick shrubbery of the opposite roadside. The pointing shafts swung straighter and the motor rounded the curve. It passed and she looked up. The blinding flash had struck the house; instantly every clapboard was sharpened to the eye. Then there had been darkness. But in that fraction of a second the girl had drawn a sudden, startled breath.

Framed in the window of his bedroom Butler had been suddenly disclosed, standing. It had been an uncanny revelation. Janet had had a sense of having seen, not her husband, but what might have been the ghost of her husband; a further sense that an unseen third person had been almost present with Julian and her upon the lawn. Before then she had believed that her husband was at the writing desk downstairs; from a certain suggestion of permanency in his attitude he had evidently not just stepped to the window at the approach of the car; no doubt he had been there for some time.

But there had been more than this. Not a line nor a lineament of Butler's features had escaped the swift projection of the machine's big batteries. His face, in that dazzling moment, had been oddly, bafflingly different from the picture her mind had carried of it.

For one thing, it had seemed to have a new severity and sternness, far more dignified than the irascibility which of recent months had so often showed there. It had been as hard and unyielding as ever, in a way as bitter and resentful; but, again, this had been modified by a look of utter loneliness, or perhaps it was a weary, saddened kind of hopelessness. Janet recreating the vision on the early afternoon train, was as little sure of what it portended as she had been when, that night upon the grass, she had accepted Julian's hand and drawn herself to her feet.

Quickly succeeding, there had been, that same evening, another episode. Julian had departed. Janet and her husband were moving up the brick path to the door.

"Janet," Butler had begun, and, in his voice, too, there had been a note of sternness, "I want to ask you a question."

"Yes?"

He had choked a little over his next words. "Have you known where the money came from to buy out Harsen?"

He was watching her narrowly, sidewise. Her heart skipped a beat. She nodded twice before she turned a serene eye to meet his troubled one. "Yes, I've known," she told him quietly.

It had been an hour or so later when Butler knocked upon her bedroom door. He opened it by an inch, and holding the knob, informed her, in his same unconsulting manner, of his plan to be absent for several days

in town. She immediately had had a vague uneasiness, but her first definite reflection had been that now was her chance to have her mother with her for a brief stay, and that, while Mrs. Fielding was there, she could slip off to perform that clear duty to herself of visiting Lotta's flat.

By the hour on Monday afternoon, however, when Mrs. Fielding had alighted cumbersomely from the station hack, Janet's uneasiness had become an anxiety which was real even if it was not defined. She was unable even to guess what might be afoot. During Tuesday and Wednesday no word or gleam of light had come and by the forenoon of today, Thursday, silence and her own brooding had put so keen an edge upon her distress of mind that mere restlessness, if nothing else, would, she believed, have impelled her to the trip. But as the train glided stealthily into the long cool station shed, she remembered that she had another and more easily defined errand ahead. . . . She searched in her small purple leather handbag to make certain again of Lotta Reynolds' address.

Passing through a swinging door and emerging upon the glaring thoroughfare, Janet gasped. Volcanoes of lava-like heat were pouring upon the city. As she crossed the pavement toward the surface line, the flagstones struck hot to the paper-like soles of her shoes. When, a few moments later, she alighted from the car and, spreading her blue parasol, made the curb and set off down the side street, the walls of the building beside her breathed a heavy warm breath against her

cheek. Almost by habit her thoughts were upon the boy with the tired eyes in the house upon the Tucker-ton hill. She half-wished she had not come away.

Presently she was before the chipped, brown steps of the apartment house which for eight months she had been too nerveless to visit. There was no less dread within her of what she was about to do than there had been but the motive force of her new resolve carried her up to the vestibule. Searching the row of polished name plates just inside the door, she repeated with a certain vehemence that she did not like the things in life for which the other woman stood, and that, voluntarily or otherwise, Lotta had brought her a good many wretched, sinking hours. She still had such hours, she remembered, as she started over the row a second time.

"Who yuh lookin' for?" A moist black face protruded itself from beneath the hall boy's sanctuary within the trap of the stairs and a languid youth in soiled shirt sleeves slouched forth, hitching his trousers.

Janet explained.

"She's lef'."

The girl despaired. She had pitched herself up for the encounter and wanted to have it over.

"Left, you say?" she said, irresolute in the doorway.

"Yessam," returned the boy, scrutinising Janet. "Gone uptown."

"Oh dear!" sighed the girl. "Do you know where?"

"Yessam." He proceeded to his retreat and from beneath a flattened stack of newspapers on a chair produced a frayed notebook. Janet almost hoped he would not be able to supply the new address; if he did, she knew that she would force herself to go. The boy did, after much heavy thumbing.

"Mrs. G-r-i-e-r," he spelled out. "Riverside Drive and——"

"Mrs. Grier!" exclaimed Janet incredulously and leaned over to see the entry which the boy held toward her. It was written in the hand which she now recognised as Lotta's. "Mrs. Grier!" she again exclaimed and forthwith a perfectly definite chemical change seemed to take place in her entire attitude toward her one-time friend. She achieved the sidewalk with far less shrinking from her errand.

In the roaring coolness of the subway Janet reproached herself somewhat for much that had been in her mind. It seemed to her clear enough that nothing, so convincingly as marriage, could have given the lie to so many of her fears. She remembered the horrible principle of life that Lotta had once enunciated and reflected that, if her friend had meant what she had said, she had also proved that she lived up to her code, such as it was. Anyway, the girl said to herself, Mrs. Reynolds' infatuation for Butler had probably passed. She emerged once more into the hot glare of the street thinking that for months she had been an absurd little fool and wondering if there were any way in which she could make amends for her coolness to Lotta, when,

lowering her parasol, she presented herself before the tomb-like portals of the Earlmore.

Two gold-braided giants confronted her in the red-carpeted hall and one of them pompously boomed her name to the telephone girl. It struck Janet, while she waited, that it was possible that her friend was still away on her honeymoon, but that outcome was promptly scouted by word to show up Mrs. Pierce. A maid ushered her through a dark hallway, in which only a silver card tray gleamed, and into a long room done in soft greys.

It was evident that in a material sense, at least, Lotta's affairs had taken a lucky turn. As the maid—a keen-eyed person and not the Tillie of former days—disappeared and the girl was left to look about her, she remembered the other apartment where Mrs. Reynolds had lived. Whereas that had been a dwelling of smart poverty, this was one of the most easy luxury. Three great windows at one end poured light; and here, high up in the tall buildings, it was cool and draughty. Beyond opened the Hudson and beginnings of the Palisades. There was a deep window seat, faintly oriental, where one could indulge in the view. Near, at one side, stood an impressively ponderous table of rich Circassian walnut, which suggested the furniture of a hotel. Upon this there was a nickle-plated telephone, a silver cigarette box, two empty cocktail glasses and a yellow bound novel. The gallery of silver-framed photographs of the other room had given away, here, to four or five cheerful French prints; there was not a

photograph to be seen. Janet was commenting to herself that this home, for all its costliness, was far less personal and expressive than the other had been, and was speculating upon the possible characteristics of Mr. Grier, when she heard a door open and a footstep at the far end of the hall.

She turned about, a dozen questions almost upon her lips, as many words of apology half-formed. Passingly, she thought how different the meeting was to be from the preconceived notion of it she had had; an occasion for warm congratulations, not contemptuous reserves. Her resentment and fears were gone and instead of wishing to shun Lotta, as she would have a poisonous thing, she found that she was prepared to cover a certain mortification at the part she herself had played with a bright, deprecating smile of friendliness. The footsteps, amazingly slow and dragging for Mrs. Reynolds, drew nearer and paused at the card tray. Janet waited with a mild inward agitation. She stood, swinging her parasol, a cool, slim figure in her fresh linen suit.

Lotta's hand brushed aside a curtain and she was in the door. Upon the instant the smile which had illumined the girl's face died. And, momentarily, she believed that if she had suffered during the eight months which had passed, Mrs. Reynolds must have suffered more. Not so much as a second was needed to realise that Lotta gave off a new and totally different impression. She did not appear older nor did she seem ill. But her large eyes, which used to flash, were heavy and

lack-lustre; that gay, spontaneous, three-quarters smile of hers was gone; her lips were parted in a kind of defeated bitterness. Janet had seen her friend before in moments of troubled emotion, but this was different. Lotta paused, her hand still at the curtain, her loose tea-gown dropping in lacy folds to her feet—a dark, tragic woman, listless and weary. There was not a hint of the dashing buoyancy and sparkle which had been so much of her charm. Like a flash, the girl's volatile sympathy leaped forth and this time she burned at the doubts and suspicions of her friend which she had harbored.

"Lotta!" cried Janet. She had not been able to recover herself for more.

"Yes, yes, I know," returned Mrs. Reynolds, with a woeful shake of her head, not looking at Janet. "I do sometimes look like the devil in these off hours. The maid's wrapping your dress. It'll be here in a moment. Come—sit down." She walked to the window-seat.

"But tell me, Lotta—please," begged Janet, following.

"Tell you what?" replied Lotta, with a shrug and, her back turned, fumbled for a cigarette.

The girl's face was filmy with bewilderment and sympathy. Nothing she more desired just then than to aid this friend in distress. But with the change in Mrs. Reynolds herself had obviously come a change in what she was willing to accept from her relation with Janet. Before, without having reached the point of full confidences, Lotta had at least invited the girl's most kindly

feelings; now, her manner bespoke an entire indifference to them. She seemed to make evident that any approach to intimacy was impossible and that, regardless of the odds against her, she would battle altogether alone. Janet, as she sensed this, was not repelled; instead, Lotta's self-decreed isolation softened the girl still more and heightened her desire to be of help.

"Well, what do you want to know?" reminded Mrs. Reynolds, and with her cigarette sat back inquisitively distant among the pillows. Her eyes had not yet squarely met Janet's. The girl dropped to the edge of the window-seat and bent toward the other woman.

"Why, tell me what's happened—about your marriage—everything!" she urged.

"Nothing much has happened," replied Mrs. Reynolds reflectively, and then, suddenly, repellingly: "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, Lotta—don't!" begged Janet.

"Well, you can see this—all this here—can't you?" She lifted her hands to take in the room and her brows up, looked about her.

"Yes, yes," caught up the girl. "But tell me—when were you married? When did you come here?"

"Oh, I came here a couple of months ago," and she examined the tip of her cigarette. "Quite scrumptious, isn't it?" Lotta paused, leaving Janet even more perplexed. "And you—how have you been?" Lotta's question had come with the hint of a rising inflection and totally without interest.

"Oh, I've been splendidly, but it's you, Lotta, you!"

"Splendid, eh? Well,, you don't particularly look it," bluntly returned Mrs. Reynolds with a restrained, miserable laugh and, perhaps to cover embarrassment, leaned forward to knock her ashes. Before she had gone on, the girl reflected that, along with the change in what Lotta would take from the relation with Janet, had come as marked a change in what she would give. The old note of affectionate protection was lacking; her manner no longer expressed a kindly, half-parental desire to assuage hurts and give whatever of comfort or understanding she could. Ill-will was not precisely involved, but every cadence of Mrs. Reynolds' voice, every averted turn of her glance, seemed to say that it was impossible that there could be a friendship, even a comfortable companionship, between them. An hour earlier and this would have been cause for many of Janet's most acute fears; now, even Mrs. Reynolds' next words, when she did proceed, did not evoke alarm.

"Every once in a while, around in restaurants, I see Butler," she remarked casually, still escaping the girl's eye, "I take it you've still got things all messed up!"

Janet crimsoned; that horrid thing in her life seemed always to be springing up. She was about to reply when the maid came into the room bearing the dress, done up into a neatly-tied parcel.

"Oh, yes, on the chair there, please," directed Mrs. Reynolds, pointing. The maid deposited the package and there was the silence of an interruption until she had departed. The girl was about to speak but Lotta raised a forbidding hand and held it with its thin col-

umn of blue smoke, until Janet, not very certain anyway of what she was going to say, nodded acquiescence. The other woman for the first time directly met her eye.

"Now, listen, my dear." Her glance did not waver; her tone had become more kindly but it was pregnant; the pause intensified the moment. "There's your dress. I want you to take it away and you're never—never," she gestured in emphasis with her cigarette, "to come here again."

The girl's eyes were wide; her lips slightly parted. At the decision and finality of Mrs. Reynolds' voice and eye, she was surprised; it seemed summary punishment even for that incivility of months which she had not been able to overcome. But Janet was not angry—her sympathy for this woman in her tragic isolation made her anxious to explain.

"I know I should have come when you wrote," she began, "I've been absurd. Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's not that," asserted Lotta, and got abruptly to her feet. "I'm not put out—not in the least. I still think you're a very charming, very sweet little girl." She was leading the way deliberately across the room; Janet rose. "I did want to see you—did have something to say to you but—"

"Lotta, you're offended!" declared Janet, with a sharp tap on the floor with her parasol. Mrs. Reynolds turned about, a mirthless smile flickering at the corners of her mouth.

"No, I'm not," she said and shook her head as if too tired to argue.

"Then why won't you tell me about yourself, about your marriage—tell me what you were going to say. I've been awfully rude; I would have come if I could."

"Would you?" questioned Lotta, incredulous, and lifted the parcel from the chair.

There was a sudden soft tap at the door. The maid entered with afternoon papers. She laid them on the table and went out again. Meanwhile Janet had crossed slowly over and stood facing Lotta, who was holding the bundle out to her.

"Would I have come?" the girl resumed. "Yes, if I could have. Can't you understand? Don't you see?" She ignored Lotta's burden and threw a small, beseeching hand toward her.

"Yes, I understand! I see—lots."

"Then you'll forgive me!"

"Oh, there's nothing to forgive." Mrs. Reynolds' reply had been a little impatient. She forced the dress upon Janet. She hooked her arm into the girl's and guided her toward the door. "Funny, isn't it?" she mused, "you and I being in pretty much the same kind of fix," and tried to smile.

Janet made an abrupt motion to pull away, but Lotta did not release her, and continued: "Don't be frightened; all I mean is that we both reached out for a lot of things and both of us came croppers trying to get them. Didn't we?"

"But I haven't come a cropper!" protested Janet vehemently and this time jerked her arm clear. They

were standing by the curtain at the entrance of the room.

"Haven't you?" asked Lotta, indifferently. "Well, I have."

"No! No! You're married. You've got all this. You must be happy." There was a strained pause. "What could have changed you this way, Lotta?"

"What's changed me. Nothing, my dear. I've changed myself."

The girl, clutching her bundle, sidled through the curtain. "I don't understand," she said, frowning, and shaking her head. They were in the dim hallway now.

"I know you don't!" replied Lotta wearily and pushed her black, lustrous hair from her forehead. Janet, dismayed, bewildered, solicitous, could not bring herself to surrender. She felt as poignantly then as ever before that Lotta, married, was a person whom she wanted for a friend.

"What would you have told me if I had come sooner?" she asked, clutching for an opening.

"Oh, not much."

"Please—what?"

"I wanted to give you something." Lotta's hand took hold of the bright knob of the vestibule door and she let her head rest against the wall. "Advice," she ended, to the girl's questioning look.

"Give it now." Janet tried to win Mrs. Reynolds with a smile and moved closer.

"No, not now," Lotta sighed and turned the knob. "I'm too chary."

"Chary of what?"

"Of giving things away."

"But advice!" teased the girl.

"Yes, advice, too," and Lotta's eyes closed for an instant. She had not yet opened the door. "It's sometimes costly, you know."

"Costly of what?" asked Janet, brightening.

"Oh, of happiness, for one thing." She hurried Janet by the elbow through the threshold. "Good-bye." And the door almost closed.

The small bundle in the crook of her arm, her face eager and troubled, Janet persisted. "Not for good, Lotta!"

"Yes—for good." Mrs. Reynolds spoke through the narrow opening and made to close the door.

"But your marriage!" pleaded the girl.

"Well, what about it?"

"Mr. Grier? Isn't he wonderful? How old is he? I want to know all about him!" Thus she pressed her eager queries.

"Don't ask foolish questions." The hand which carried Janet's parasol prevented the door from closing.

"But, Lotta!"

"No questions!" Mrs. Reynolds adjured in firm tones.

"Not about your marriage?" exclaimed the amazed girl.

"No!" and Lotta, a tall, sombre figure within the hallway shook her head.

Janet stared and did not move.

"Go away. It's no use." The crack narrowed, then abruptly widened. "But one last favour?"

"Yes, Lotta, what?" Janet's face was vivid, alert beneath the yellowish socket of the vestibule light.

"Don't tell anyone I'm married," Mrs. Reynolds smiled forlornly; the door again began to close.

"Don't tell!" Janet cried, and involuntarily sprang forward.

"No," said Lotta. The door was open only an inch when she concluded, "because I'm not."

The door closed decisively in Janet's face.

The girl reached the glaring street, trembling in a panic. It did not occur to her, as she turned toward the subway, to raise her parasol against the mid-afternoon sun. The wide brim of her hat shaded her eyes, but in the shadow they stood forth large and dark with horror. For a moment, while she was counting out the nickel for her subway ticket, she believed that her knees would give way beneath her and at the back of her head a heavy pulse beat, almost audibly it seemed to her, when the train made its station stops on the way downtown. If she had been in terror of Lotta before, she was in ten times greater terror now.

She dwelt for only the briefest moment upon the more abstract aspect of the matter. It was a revelation to her that vice—that was what she called it—claimed women with clear, fresh skin, with taste, with all the outward and visible signs of a social order which often commin-

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"Oh, Mrs. Pierce, that pride of your husband's—that pride!" He wriggled his hand
and shook his head, despairingly

gled easily enough with her own. That she had known, known well, admitted to her house, permitted to hold and fondle her boy, such a woman, was a passing shock. But it was the personal aspect which made the fibres of her soul quiver. There was absolutely nothing in her philosophy to palliate in the smallest degree the thing which Mrs. Reynolds had done. Not a crime of the Decalogue of which she did not now believe Lotta capable—utter baseness, perfidy, wiles, designs. The menace of such a woman made life unendurable; if she were to find it possible to exist she must either lay the spectre or know forthwith that it was real. With a mad plunge of her old spirit she declared that she must have it out with Butler, once and for all.

Shortly after four o'clock she reached her husband's office. On the way downtown she had paused at the station to rid herself of her parcel by checking it. She walked into the reception room, blue tinted and with the pale inexpressive prints to which her husband's partner had raised one of his ill-bred suggestions. To one side was the door which led to Butler's office. A man in overalls was industriously scratching at the panel of glass with a rasping knife; Janet was about to ask him to step aside when an office boy came out of the room opposite—the room which had been Harsen's.

"This way, please," he called to the girl. She turned about.

"Which way?"

"In there!" and he pointed to Harsen's one-time

office. It was months since she had visited the place; no doubt Butler had moved. She crossed the carpet and knocked.

"Come in!"

Upon the instant she was unable to do so. Clutching at the knob, her wrist could not immediately turn it. The voice had not only been familiar but had brought with it its own peculiar associations. It was Harsen's. When Janet did enter he grinned at sight of her and advanced, rubbing his hands with unction.

"Well, this is a surprise!" he ejaculated, and then with deep-throated cordiality, "but come in! Come in!" Janet, stunned, hesitated. Harsen was swinging up a chair for her beside his desk. "Well, I suppose you've seen the papers," he was saying in his heavy laugh, "and think you ought to have a chance to lay me out, eh?"

With a pretentious bow he tried to motion Janet to the chair. Clearly he was the same Harsen, only with a hint of stouter confidence which, it seemed, was emboldening him to attempt gallantry. Janet revolted and mustered her dignity.

"Oh, come in," he repeated. "I don't bite, you know," and he laughed and bowed again. The girl advanced a step or two.

"I was looking for Mr. Pierce," she explained with an effort. Her voice sounded timid in her own ears.

"Well, come in anyhow. You're just the person I'd like to have a little talk with today."

"What can you possibly have to say to me, Mr. Harsen?" and she felt that she had regained her nerve.

"Why, I should think you would imagine I might have a great deal." His thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest, his head cocked, he was standing off, surveying her. Instantaneously Janet had a sense of whirling, but she caught herself.

"I'm sure you're mistaken!" she replied with all the coolness she could summon.

"Then I guess you've either been missing connections with your husband or you haven't seen the papers," Harsen spoke with an insolent, smiling certainty. The pulse in Janet's head beat deafeningly, she felt herself trembling as she made the only reply she was able to make.

"Why, no, I haven't seen the papers," she said weakly. "What's in them, Mr. Harsen?"

"I'll show you," he declared crisply, and took a rapid step to his desk. The girl moved slowly to the chair he had placed. He handed her a newspaper already folded to the spot he desired. "There," he said, and pointed to a paragraph.

"Business troubles," Janet read at the head of the item and sat down before she went on. A little below was the name of Butler Pierce. It required both hands to hold the paper steady and even then she had difficulty in following the lines. Harsen had dropped into his desk chair and was squeaking back and forth. She felt his glance as she made out in a befogged way that But-

ler had made an assignment—whatever that was—to the Excelsior Trust Company.

“Maybe it’s a little clearer, eh, what I might possibly have to say to you?” commented Harsen.

“Why, no, Mr. Harsen, I don’t know that it is.” She handed the paper to him and attempted to rise; she was too weak; irresolutely she dropped back in the chair. To hide her struggle she tried poking indolently with her parasol. There was a pause.

“Perplexed?” he asked, vaguely confidential.

“I hadn’t understood that you were with Mr. Pierce any longer,” she finally brought forth as lightly as she could.

“I don’t know that you can say that. I’m exactly with him now.” Again there was that throaty laugh. Janet tried to collect her ideas while she waited for strength to go. Harsen gave her a moment and then abruptly backing his chair to make space between them, began. He spoke in a tone half cajoling, half-deprecating and as if they two had a certain superior understanding in common. Janet, idly jabbing with her parasol, her eyes, down, a remotely contemptuous smile on her lips, hardly heard him; this was the man who had once been so painfully self-conscious with her!

“Now, my dear Mrs. Pierce,” he began gutturally, “you musn’t blame me. I think I can come pretty near to guessing how a lady like you is likely to feel in the circumstances. They’re hard—yes, by goodness, they’re hard! But I don’t want anyone’s ill will—nobody’s at all! You know that!” She lifted her glance

for an instant in sudden surprise and as quickly lowered it. "I'm all for peace—peace all around and you've got to remember that the hard school of necessity, in amongst the heavy handed bunch, where I was born, are—well, they're different; different from—"; and he was wagging his head now from side to side, "from your crowd. We don't carry around—can't afford to, you know—the rules of the kid glove school of business. Not much! Win out—that's what I was taught and—"; Harsen sat up and spread his big arms in a wide gesture and regarded her, his brows raised in a kind of innocent bewilderment; "and a man can't do more'n following his teachings!" He paused, held his position, and concluded, "now, really, can he, Mrs. Pierce?"

His arms fell and he began again. "Now, when the trust company sent for me, what could you expect? Expect me to lend money to your husband? Why, Lord, t'wasn't many months since he paid good money not to have me round the place. Besides it wouldn't be business and you know I'm all for just good, straight business." Janet's smile became broadly contemptuous and even more absent, but Harsen's tone took no account of it. "And so, having the price handy and needing occupation, naturally I stepped in. Wouldn't you, anybody, have done the same? Why, of course! And what was the very first thing I did—the very first; did it right down in those tony bank offices before Powell and all the rest of 'em?"

He paused. Janet could not have asked him what

he had done if she had wanted to. She knew now that in a moment she would be able to leave. Harsen, still leaning forward, answered his own question.

"Well, now, I'll tell you," he said humouringly, "I offered your husband a job—a good, fat job—same duties, same pay as he got at P. & S. Now could a man be decenter, squarer than that—than I was? Not much! But did he like it? Not much!" He stopped before he concluded, "Oh, Mrs. Pierce, that pride of your husband's—that pride!" He wriggled his hand and shook his head, despairingly. "It's fierce, and can't you understand a little better my point of view—not get too worked up about this?" He was watching her.

Janet straightened and sat forward in her chair. She did not look at him, but moistened her lips and asked by way of reply:

"Do I understand then that Mr. Pierce is not now in the office?"

"That's right," and again Harsen was tipping easily back and forth.

"Do you know when he will be back?"

"Well now, that's a little mite hard to say." Harsen grinned, scratched his head and turned toward the window as if to hide his amusement. "He cleaned his desk today," at length he ambled on, "and I may say that he seemed to clean it like a man with—well, now what shall I say—no immediate plans for returning?" Once more came the heavy laugh as he faced about.

"Do you know where I can find him?" Her question prompted even more sly mirth from Harsen.

"Well, now, I suppose, Mrs. Pierce," he replied, "that I'm about the last man in this town tonight who'd be able to tell you that. Haven't you heard from him?"

The girl got to her feet. "No doubt I shall find him at home." Janet inclined her head coolly and went out.

As she passed hurriedly into the reception room, she glanced at the opposite door. The workmen had gone and the name "Butler Pierce" had been scratched to a glazier's smudge.

CHAPTER XVI

ON THE TUCKERTON HILL

THE five-thirty train reaches Tuckerton at something well after six. Janet took it that afternoon and nodded brightly to twenty odd men as she searched the aisles for her husband. He was not there. The girl alighted, dazed, at the station and a hack bore her home.

During the up-hill pull the driver spoke to her twice over his shoulder, but she did not answer. The heat was thick, stagnant; the trees along the driveway unnaturally still; it was as if they had just died. The rattling carriage dragged around the bend. Janet saw a small, dusty machine close by the red brick wall in front of the house. She did not move a muscle nor urge the driver on, but, upon the instant, knew that the hour had come for her to battle to save what she could from her eager girlhood. Already she had been certain that her troubled affairs were rushing to a flux, but now she realised that there was a greater conflict ahead than she had expected. The car was Dr. Broadbent's; and it was a girl with a face driven to pure whiteness, but with calm and steady eyes who stepped from the vehicle and started up the short brick walk.

Her mother, struggling with a quavering chin, met her in the doorway with the announcement that Butler

would not be out until later—that he was dining with Julian Powell.

"You're sure he said Julian," was all that Janet paused to ask, and tossing her jacket over the end of the couch, went upstairs.

Dr. Broadbent was beside the child's crib, tugging at his moustache and looking down at the child. He turned as the girl came in.

"Well?" she said, after she had stooped over to feel her boy's forehead.

"Two degrees!" Dr. Broadbent supplied laconically, shifted a little uneasily on his heavy legs and continued tugging at his moustache.

Janet regarded the baby. He was twisting his head from side to side and drawing in his small lips. Every moment or so he whimpered. Mrs. Fielding came into the room and hovered tremulously behind the girl. Janet turned to her with a question.

It appeared that the heat that afternoon, almost unnoticed by Janet, had mounted to a cruel pitch. At four o'clock, her mother told her, the boy had seemed to become more fretful. For an hour she had fanned him while he had kept working his small body, exactly as he was doing now. About five she had determined to send for the doctor. While she had been awaiting the physician's arrival the child had cried out several times, strangely, sharply; and then, even as Janet stood facing her mother, in the breathless, creeping dusk of the room, there came from the shadows of the crib, that thin, startled wail of pain for which, hourly, through

that summer she had listened. It was then that she decided to send for Dr. King.

"Do no harm, anyway," weakly acknowledged Dr. Broadbent, running a black, chunky hand over the child's cheek. And Janet went downstairs.

When the girl came from the telephone closet she found her mother, uncertain and tearful, in the curtained doorway of the living room. Janet spoke in quick despatching tones.

"Listen, mother," she commanded, a hand gripping tightly upon the older woman's fleshy arm, "Julian always goes to one of two places—Tartaran's or Hampton's. Ask for him when you call up. Tell him to bring Butler to the wire. Tell Butler that the baby is ill; how ill we don't know. Now—be sure you get this straight!"

Janet paused for emphasis.

"Yes, dearie, I will," Mrs. Fielding quavered, a concentrating hand at her forehead.

"Dr. King will be out on the eight forty-five train. Butler is to meet him on the train—on the train, you understand—and bring him as quickly as he can to the house. Is that clear?"

Her mother nodded. Janet turned about and went to the pantry door to tell the maid there would be no dinner that night. When she had returned upstairs, the doctor had drawn a chair beside the crib and sat keeping watch, his legs sprawled in front of him. There was no light and the room was filled with a hot, suffocating gloom. The girl leaned upon an end of the cot

and peered at the boy. She could see the glisten of fever in his eyes when he turned them toward her.

"Umph," half-grunted Dr. Broadbent, breaking the long silence.

"In an hour and twenty-five minutes Dr. King will be here," supplied Janet without a trace of emotion.

"An hour and twenty-five minutes," deliberated Dr. Broadbent and went to the window to consult his watch.

"Umph," he again commented and returned to the crib. He did not sit down, but stood for a brief space and presently brought forth slowly:

"I guess," and his tone was cautious, hesitating, "that the best thing we can do until we get a diagnosis is to apply ice packs."

"Very well," returned Janet, starting for the door, "I'll get it."

As she passed through the dining room Mrs. Fielding was talking into the telephone.

"Is this the Empire Club? Is Mr. Winter—Mr. Charles Winter there?" The daughter paused, inquiry in her face.

"I couldn't find them," her mother explained timorously. "They're not at Hampton's. I'm getting Charles to hunt them up. How's the—"

"That's right," cut in Janet with a nod and passed through the pantry door; behind it the ice chest stood. She was dealing sharp, strong blows, her arms bared to the elbows for work, before she heard her mother begin addressing Winter over the wire. With every word

Mrs. Fielding's voice rose higher; it was evident that she was in a panic.

"What? What's that you say?
Julian with you now? Butler not there?
He must be! He must be, Charles!"

A pause. Unremittingly, Janet drove the pick into the block of ice. A large chunk crashed noisily off against the zinc side. Not a syllable of her mother's had escaped her; somehow she was not surprised; she realised keenly the import of what she had heard; Butler had lied. But not a muscle eased in her work; there was no slack in the driving blows; Mrs. Fielding was speaking again.

"No, there is no misunderstanding. No, I'm sure—positive. Very well, but you must find him. The child's sick—very sick. Get the message to Butler at once; send him immediately. . . . Yes, the eight-forty-five."

Janet knew that her mother would not open the pantry door. When the girl presently swept from the lining room toward the stairs, a large bowl in her hands, she glanced, in passing, at Mrs. Fielding's large form by a window. Her mother did not turn about, but the very curve, dimly silhouetted, of her bulky shoulders, bespoke her distress. Neither spoke and Janet did not return downstairs for more than an hour.

There was already a hard armour about the girl's soul, encasing her capacity for feeling. Once during that time it was pierced. The ice packs had been laid; Dr. Broadbent, silent, with unspoken excuses, breathed

wheezingly in his chair; a single light, with a cluster of small insects beating against it, burned above the dressing table; Janet vacillated between the foot of the crib and the window. The boy's fretting persisted; at one moment he would try to free himself of the cooling cloths at his cheeks, at another an uncertain hand would grope to hold them against his face; spasmodically, he broke out into frail, strengthless cries. The time dragged and at a minute when the heat seemed more tense, more choking, than it had been, Janet thought to walk the floor with her child. At the pressure of her arm beneath him there was an outburst of pain which drove from the girl's face the little blood that there was. She eased the boy tenderly down again and before she stood, looked across the bed to the physician. He shook his head once and took an abrupt turn across the room. In the instant, the girl's countenance had had in it, to the full, the everlasting tragedy of motherhood; from her face, white with the agony of her soul, dark with great shadows of fatigue and strain, her eyes, luminous with un murmured prayer, had glowed forth, not like the things of earth, but like stars.

Janet felt the futility of questions until after Dr. King should have come and there was only a single whispered query that she propounded through that age-long wait. It concerned the charges which the specialist ordinarily made. With her husband's business gone, with her husband himself—she stopped there because she dared not go on, and asked:

"If a person hasn't the money to pay a specialist like Dr. King what's generally done?"

The local practitioner shrugged his shoulders. "King's a topnotcher," was all he said.

At nine-thirty she went downstairs, because shortly Dr. King and her husband would be due. Mrs. Fielding had a light or two on, feebly illuminating the room. She sat heavily forward on the edge of a chair near the empty and swept fireplace, her back half-turned, a handkerchief pressed tight to her lips. Janet was conscious that her mother's tear-stained eyes followed her from the steps to the open door. There was nothing to say and the girl went out, reflecting upon the surface of her mind how distressingly hot her mother looked; little moist ringlets of hair were sticking to the older woman's brow.

Searching down the road, from the brick path, there was no sight of vehicle lamps and, listening, no creak of approaching wheels. A swish of wind struck fresh at her throat and she looked overhead. It was blackening and the long trail of a cloud rushed across the moon. Momentarily there was far-off thunder; the heavy night chirped and shrilled; the tall road lamp a score of yards away crackled and sputtered; off somewhere a train hurried into distance. Janet waited, a wraith-like figure against the dark of the lawn; and it was there within a few moments that she met Dr. King and led him into the house. He was alone.

"I missed connections with your husband," the physician said, but nothing more. Inside she took his

measure and could feel him taking hers, even while he was depositing his stripe-banded straw hat and stick upon a chair. He was a slight man in a square cut suit. Youth had not left him, but it was the cared-for youth of a man of fifty. His clean-shaven face was hard with the lines of thinking, his grey eyes quick and appraising; his hands very white, strong, and prehensile. He made a bow, threw a quick glance at Mrs. Fielding, and asked to be led upstairs.

At the entrance of the specialist Dr. Broadbent turned from his stolid and puzzled scrutiny beside the crib. The abruptness of Dr. King's nod seemed to abash him. He backed away until he was unobtrusively against the wall.

"I need more light," said Dr. King, briskly approaching the cot. Janet sped to four points in the room and it was ablaze. For an instant his eyes rested upon her, and she felt their keenness.

"Ah, that's better," was what Dr. King said, and he stooped over the boy, feeling his neck and slim wrists.

"Fever before tonight?"

"No—no, I don't think so." Dr. Broadbent was shifting uneasily in the obscurity of his position.

"No—there hasn't been," put in Janet and again her lips were a firm line.

"What's the feeding?" Dr. King's questions shot out crisply. Janet told herself that she must not fumble.

"Beef-juice, the white of eggs, barley gruel."

"How much gruel?"

"Twelve ounces every four hours," she explained.

"Your directions, doctor?" The specialist, looking up, propelled the question at Dr. Broadbent, who started forward and acknowledged that the directions were his.

"Sleep badly?" Dr. King was again addressing himself to Janet.

"Yes—at least four nights in the last week." She was standing at the end of the crib. Her tense gaze never left the specialist's face.

"Strip him," he ordered, and Janet with workman-like hands lifted the child and took off his tiny night-dress and shirt.

Dr. King grasped the flushed, slight body. At his touch the boy sighed and for an instant his over-bright, restless eyes closed. The physician placed him gently in the middle of the large bed; the child seemed infinitely helpless and small there. Dr. Broadbent approached a few timid steps nearer; the girl rested her elbows on the footboard; her heart seemed to have come to a standstill. The physician turned the baby over. The boy worked his little head around and looked at Janet, wonderingly; she saw him again drawing in and out his baby lips in a fruitless effort to slake his thirst. The girl shifted her glance.

With amazing deftness, Dr. King's fingers were passing along the child's back and a broad, flat thumb pressed from spot to spot across the base of the narrow spine. The boy screamed; the physician stood erect.

"That's it," he pronounced and motioned to Janet

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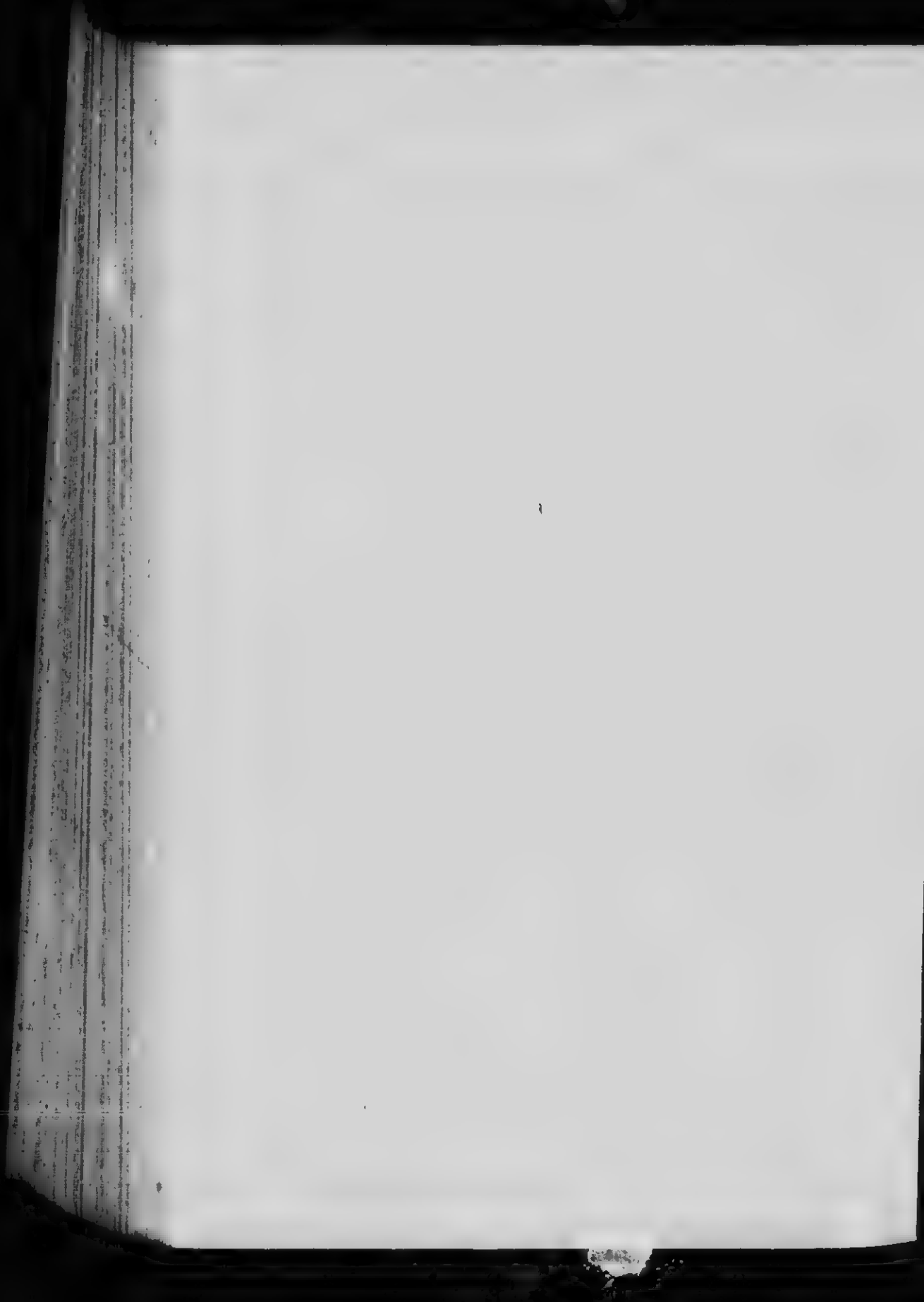
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"Ah, that's better," was what Dr. King said, and he stooped
over the boy, feeling his neck and slim wrists



to put the night dress on the child. She took fresh grip on herself and obeyed.

The two physicians moved together to the window. There were whispers and the sullen mumble of nearing thunder; a curtain whipped into the room; Dr. Broadbent closed the sash. When Janet lowered the child into the crib and turned about, Dr. King was confronting her.

"We'll have to operate," he told her briefly. The girl steadied herself by the glance that was in the other's eye. Passingly, she was amazed at the control he gave her. "It will be necessary," he was continuing, after a well-timed pause, "to remove the child for that purpose to town. Just now we've another job. There's no cause for immediate alarm if we can break the fever."

Janet nodded; Dr. King took out his watch. "I'll stay the night," he announced. Again the girl's only reply was a choking nod. She was conscious that Dr. Broadbent was making hastily for his bag on a chair.

"Well, that relieves me," he was saying, "I've a confinement case coming eight miles from here. Good-night, good-night!" and he backed from the room.

Dr. King turned and followed toward the door; he did not go out, but noiselessly closed it. Janet beside the crib did not stir. The physician returned and they stood facing each other. The girl could hear the child's futile sucking at his parched lips. For a long moment she and Dr. King regarded each other. Janet was glad that it was with such a man that she would fight out the

issue of her son. Every cord of her being tightened; her eyes grew darker. Her lips were white; they parted and she asked evenly:

"What first?"

The physician told her; it was to administer an alcohol rub. Janet fetched the bottle and again the boy was laid upon the big bed. She bent over him with a sense that, indeed, the conflict was on. A passing flame of anger once shot up within her that her husband, the man to whom she had given her life, was as removed as if he were not the child's father. But she promptly quelled it and her hands passed gently over the boy's hot limbs. From the other side of the bed, Dr. King, frowning, supervised.

"Careful," he cautioned her, as she began upon the ridge of darkened knobs down the boy's back, "it's in the spine, you know."

"What is?" Janet wanted to ask, but did not; she was afraid if she spoke just then that something would snap; and it might be ruin to give way. Unflinchingly she bent to her task; she did not so much as lift her head from the vision which swam before her of a twisted and mis-shapen man with a wizened face and immemorially tired eyes.

The rub was over; the little body had been again lifted tenderly to the crib; a cool, fresh sheet spread to the boy's chin. Dr. King was scratching upon his prescription pad. The thunder was booming up the valley; Janet knew that it would strike the hill soon. Wind, too, was rushing through the tree tops; she could hear

it, even through the closed window and gave thanks for her coming ally, the rain.

"Does your druggist keep open?" Dr. King did not look at her, but, standing solidly on his feet, ripped one sheet and began upon another.

"Until ten."

The physician took out his watch. "Then he's not open."

Presently he tore another sheet and the scratching resumed upon a third.

"Someone will have to rout him out," he remarked, incidentally, absently, "who'll go?"

A few heavy drops whipped against the pane; there was a stabbing flash; instantly afterward a sullen roll.

"I will," said Janet and was turning down a sleeve when she was conscious that the scratching of the physician's pen had abruptly ceased. She glanced up.

"You?" he asked.

This time she only nodded, and with another bite of anger at her heart, turned the other sleeve. She knew Dr. King was still blankly regarding her, but she did not glance at him. More rain spit at the window.

"Very well," was all he said and there was scratching again. It ceased and Janet held out her hand.

In the vestibule below hung her rough, knee-length coat. Mrs. Fielding had barely risen before Janet had it on.

"Your slippers! You've only your slippers!" the girl heard her mother call, but slammed the door upon the words.

It was a good mile to the village pharmacy and all down hill. Janet had reached there before the storm that night broke in full fury. Her coat was spotted with rain drops; her hair was moist. More than that she had escaped when, red-flushed and panting, she thrust without attempting speech, the slips of paper at the staggered man who answered her emergency ring. But while she struggled for breath upon a stool at the pink-netted soda fountain the pent-up heavens broke. Through the plate glass she saw a vicious spear of light hurl itself earthward. She closed her eyes against it and there was a crash which rattled the bottles on a nearby shelf. A howl of wind leapt forward, bringing a raging splatter with its onslaught. The druggist came from behind the partition at the end of the store. He took his pipe from his mouth and trumpeted with his hands. Janet merely beckoned him to his task. When the prescriptions were done he held the package from her.

"No, I must," she said, momentarily closing her eyes, and took the parcel from him.

As Janet passed on the way home the lighted face of the clock over the Tuckerton bank showed fifteen minutes before eleven. As long as there was sidewalk she ran. The flagstones alternately glistened with flowing water and were speckled with the fury of a fresh down-pour. Her slippers soaked. The girl was breathless again when she came to the upgrade road; her coat was a soggy weight upon her shoulders and against her legs. The ruts which marked the course up the hill were streams; deep puddles had formed and she had

to splash through them. The water was cold against her ankles, and stones at almost every step bruised her feet. The wind was against her; with every drive of rain she shut her teeth, lowered her head, and plunged against it.

Her hair loosened and tumbled, wet and heavy, about her eyes. With sudden wild movements of her free hand she would brush it back. The road lights seemed dimmer. She barely heard the thunder nor was she conscious of the vivid jags of lightning striking from the sky. The coat weighed more heavily; it seemed to drag her down and work impedingly between her knees. She did not pause to take it off, but began wriggling one arm clear as she ran. She was almost in the act of transferring the bottles in order to free the other arm when there was a sudden blackness. The string of road lamps had ceased to burn.

It was impossible at the instant to see. She stopped and stripped off the coat and tossed it away. The rain was refreshing on her arms and neck and down her back. All she could hear was her own breathing and it rasped like a rip-saw in her ears. There was a blinding flash and the girl made out the road ahead of her for twenty yards. She did not hear the answering crash of thunder as she plunged forward again.

With both arms now she was clutching the bottles. Her ankle turned upon a piece of rock; only a quick movement saved her from falling. Presently she was deep in mud at a side of the road. Another blinding flame set her right. The pulses in her head were beating menacingly and she felt ill. Her legs seemed to

grow heavier and to stiffen. Again an ankle turned and this time she went down. She kept the medicines upraised in her hands and struck full force upon her elbows. There was no perceptible pain. For a second she lay still, her whole slight body shaken as she fought for breath. The night spit and crackled and roared around her. A spread of lightning made her realise how dizzy she was.

She tried to get to her feet and suddenly found that she was standing. Three stumbling steps into the dark, against the rain; a sharp dash of her hand across her eyes; rivulets washing up over her feet; a staggered step or two more; a sickening whirl within her head; a flash, a murderous explosion, and, tottering, she wondered, in some far-off corner of her brain, if she had really seen her shadow thrown into long, black, steady relief from behind and . . .

She was blinking against the dripping head lamps of a machine. Someone was gathering her into his arm and muttering angrily.

What the man's imprecations were, Janet did not know. She did know, however, that the man was Julian Powell.

There was no way of even guessing the hour. Sometime earlier Dr. King had tiptoed into the little bedroom to tell her that the fever was down. Sitting on the edge of the mattress he had fondled her hot hand for a moment and tiptoed out again. Since then, her returning consciousness had been agonized by the facts

of her life. The house was still and a cool breeze fanned across her. Upon a chair lay her blue dressing gown. She wrapped herself in it and felt with a bare, white foot beneath the bed for her tufted slippers. For a moment she steadied herself against the brass head rail and then quietly opened the door. In spite of her weakness there was something which she must do at once, downstairs—something which would give her the full measure of her crisis.

A light showed through the crack of her mother's door; there was the half-dark of a summer's night; the rain had ceased; she thought there must be a moon. Janet stole down. At the last step she halted. A dim form was stretched, sleeping, on the couch. She knew it was Julian; his breathing came quietly, regularly, and she passed into the dining room and silently drew shut the telephone closet door.

The overhead bulb was easy to find and she lifted the telephone book to the ledge. Tracing with her finger, she found the number she wanted. She gave it and waited; at length:

"Is this the Earlmores?"

A second passed.

"Mrs. Grier's apartment, please."

There was a fumbling at the switch keys.

"Busy," came back. "Hold the wire."

More fumbling with the plugs; the girl knew something had gone amiss; there was a connection.

"Yes, Mr. Winter. . . . what is it you want?"

A great loneliness came to the girl; the voice had been Butler's.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

It was some moments before Janet was able to leave the telephone closet. Almost immediately the operator of the Earlmore had discovered the tangle of wires. There had been nothing but buzzing while Janet stared at the blank, glaringly white wall in front of her. "Here's your party," roused her.

"Never mind," she had choked and got the receiver back on the hook.

Presently she was able to rise; her chair scraped noisily and when she opened the door, she was face to face with Julian Powe".

"Who were you calling?" he demanded harshly. He stood there, collarless, and in his striped shirt.

Janet did not reply.

"The Earlmore?" He had not moved and his attitude was tense.

Janet nodded and reached out a hand for support. He steadied her by an elbow into the living room and down the length of it to a deep chair at the other end. Janet sank into it and Julian snapped on a single bulb in the cluster beneath the shade of the table light. The room was suffused dimly. Powell lit a cigarette and moved noiselessly to the mantel-piece. The girl looked

over and up to him with eyes that no longer expressed feeling. It was evident that in the pause he had regained his calm, but his glance did not meet hers.

"Well, Julian," she said presently and her tone seemed to acknowledge the completeness of her defeat and isolation. The cheerful, busy little clock ticked minutes away before he made a reply. Then in an even whisper he asked:

"Do you know when Dr. King will operate?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm not sure Dr. King will operate at all," she declared with a little bitterness. Julian directed a column of smoke at the tip of his cigarette. His eyes were still lowered. "How in the world can I afford it?" she wondered to him and her gaze travelled slowly about the room—to her white panellings, to her chintzes, to her once treasured mahogany pieces. "And, of course," she resumed, "all this pretty thing of mine must—." She trembled on the last words but did not cry.

"How did you learn?" he inquired.

"Of what—the smash?"

Powell nodded. To the girl he was handsome and easy and consoling over there.

"Oh, I happened to go to the office," she replied.

"Harsen there?"

The girl drew her blue wrapper a little closer. "Do you know," she said with contemptuous despair, "once I imagined he was gone, gone for good—really out."

"Out of the business?" took up Powell. "Oh, Janet, the Harsens of the world are never out."

There was more silence until she stirred a little and asked dully, "What was it happened, anyway?"

"Oh, I'll tell you sometime. Never mind now. It's a long mixed, absurd story." Janet did not have enough spirit or interest to force the inquiry; it was a relatively small matter that Butler was an economic outcast. And then Powell was returning to the child.

"What'll you do about the boy?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know, Julian—I don't know! Take him, maybe, to one of those public places where—"

"Where," he broke in, "young doctors try their hands," and now there was remote bitterness in his tone, also. "Yes, I know." Again Janet trembled on the edge of tears. "But, of course," Powell was saying, "you needn't do that."

"Do what?" she managed.

"Go to one of those public places, as you call them," he said casually. "I'll settle Dr. King's bill."

A great weight rolled from the girl's heart, but she had only a sardonic smile for her own relief. Nevertheless, for all the pain in them, there was infinite tenderness in the eyes she raised to Julian's face. Presently Janet roused herself in her chair.

"It's funny, Julian," she said wistfully, "do you know that you're the only person I'd be entirely willing to let do that." Her mind checked off the figures of her own words and she added: "That is, persons who could, and somehow with you—" she was thoughtful before she concluded, "well, with you I don't mind a bit."

"I'm glad, Janet," he returned quietly and after a

pause, still missing her eye: "Of course it's all right and I imagine you know I'd be glad to do more." Then he looked up and abruptly shot out: "If you'd just let me."

His thin lips closed upon the words and he was watching her narrowly. The girl's pulse involuntarily quickened; she found that without conscious effort she was sitting straighter.

"What else could there be, Julian?" she asked in a dry voice. Her eyes were wide.

"What else could there be?" he repeated, and, jerking his cigarette into the fireplace, advanced toward her. In a flash, she saw that his restraint had vanished. Before she was quite certain of herself he had clutched her wrists and was drawing her to her feet. An arm supported her back and he was pressing her to him.

"Oh, Janet! Oh, Janet!" he breathed and gathered closer her slight, limp body. The girl raised an arm, but he covered it in his embrace. She could feel him trembling. His face burned down close to hers; his eager breath was upon her cheek. Words were pouring in a tumult from him. Tighter and tighter he held her. She struggled a little; she could feel the gentle strength of his lithe body. She tried to twist her head away; his arm held it firm. Again she struggled and then was still.

Janet, as her eyes, lustrous in the half light of the room, looked into his, hardly heard what Julian said. She knew he was pleading for her boy, for her child's life, for her son's chance, pleading for herself—for

that broad, full life of flaming color and richness which they could share; pleading for himself and the deep-down yearnings of his soul. She saw his fine, intelligent face suffuse with the heat of his avowal; the delicate muscles of his neck grow taut with the tensivity of his feeling. She made no move to recoil from him. For uncounted moments she lay in his arms, a yielding, soft, tired thing. And Janet Pierce knew that in mind and in soul and in vivid imagination she was reckoning this man as a husband; picturing herself in myriad relations with him and wondering if through him did not lie that goal of happiness for which, during youth, she had strained.

CHAPTER XVIII

BREAKFAST AND AFTERWARD

SHE did not wonder for long. Julian's lips had sought hers and at the scorch of his kisses all that slept within her had been roused. She stiffened and pushed him from her.

"Oh," she sobbed from depths of herself she had not known. Powell moved closer, but she motioned him off and clutching the bannister rail, went slowly upstairs, never once looking around. Her room regained, she closed the door and dropped full length upon the bed. Lying there then she seemed precisely what she was—a girl knocked flat by the giant club of life. She had made her youthful rush at the world and the world had made its age-old rush back.

It was hard to think, but clearly enough one thing stood forth: that, exactly as despicably and outrageously as others and the world had failed her, so she herself had failed herself. She had had a definite ideal of personal conduct, of personal nobility; she herself had fallen short of it. Mitigating circumstances were not in the question; there was the fact: in the outwash of life she had emerged no finer, no truer, than others whom she had condemned. From one point of view she seemed to herself even less worthy; for others had meas-

ured inadequately to standards which she had created for them and which they had not necessarily accepted; she had measured inadequately to standards to which, with all the intensity of her nature, she had consecrated herself.

Whether her view was distorted or not, Janet believed that she had been guilty of essential unfaithfulness. It certainly was not in accord with her marriage vows, she told herself, to lie placidly in the arms of a man other than the one to whom she had given her love and pledged her honor and to reckon that other man as she had reckoned Julian Powell. That she had known even before she burst from him that she did not love him was not an excuse. Butler's infidelity—and she could read his presence in Lotta's flat at an hour near midnight in no other way—was no excuse. Not even her child's urgent necessities were an excuse. Indeed, that she had considered desires and necessities at all seemed to her to augment rather than diminish her guilt. Never, never, she was sure, could she square that which she had done with her sense of right and wrong, with the ideals of life she had established and cherished.

What had just occurred seemed incredible; an hour previously and she would not have believed that such unworthiness was in her. It was the type of thing against which she had set her will. And yet the sting of the spots where Julian's kisses had fallen was a convincing reminder of the actuality of it all. It seemed absolutely to complete the circle of her calamity and to bring her to her tether's end. The full weight of her

troubles settled upon her and she was sure at the moment that if there were any escape from existence she would not go on with it.

What would be the use? Nothing was left, she believed, for which to live. Every hope, every ideal, every dream, was gone. There was the baby, she remembered, but was at the moment certain that nothing but misery—death or worse—could be the issue with him. Matters never got better; matters invariably got worse. Her mind, in witness, went back to the days and weeks following her breach with her husband. Then the world had threatened; now it had made good on its threats. Butler had been cruel, now he was unfaithful; there had been the menace of business failure and poverty, now there was failure and poverty; her boy had been ailing, now he was desperately ill. Moreover, then she had been able to find spars to which to cling—the child, her dreams for him, a belief that despite all things the core of her was fine, a hope, even if at times it had been a forlorn one, that all her affairs might somehow mend and that some day she could reclaim life upon terms akin to her first eager vision. But now there did not seem to be a spar in sight; there was utterly no use, she thought, in longer breasting the waves. The years reached before her, empty and desolate, full only of despair.

The outrageous, heartless, cheat of life, too, revolted her from existence; its promise had been so high, its fulfilment was so shabby. Why had she been taught ever to suppose that she could keep herself true and

fine? Why had she been allowed to expect that her husband would be a glorious, noble, achieving man? By what right had the dream of a wonderful child been implanted within her? Why had not the path of muck, of poverty, of dishonor, of lost respect, of misery, that she would have to tread, been pointed out to her? Instead, only the most alluring vistas had been disclosed and she had been led to believe that those were the pastures in which she would play; that life was a thing to enjoy, not to be endured; that people were generous and kind and faithful and that there was nothing, really, very terrible under the sun. From the beginning she had been cruelly deceived. But wasn't that very tricking of her a part of the awfulness of life; that awfulness which had laid her child low, sent Butler from her, made Lotta Reynolds what she was; that awfulness which produced a Harsen and perverted the friendship of a Julian Powell? She did not know; she presumed it was but, anyway, nothing could be more terrible, it seemed to her, than the mere business of living.

But at twenty-two there is a hot immediateness about life and other aspects of her problem presented themselves; she tried to think what she would do. It was clear that she must leave Butler; his infidelity seemed to impose that obligation upon her sense of decency; all the dictates of her social code pointed that way. Entirely aside from that, however, why go on living in the same house, eating at the same table, with a man who was neglectful, who no longer loved her, who lied to her as Butler had lied that very night and unquestion-

ably had been lying in the same way to her for many months? Even had he been technically faithful, there could be nothing honorable in such a relation. As it was, she told herself, there was every reason why it must forthwith end. She would take her boy—if he lived—and make the best existence she could with him, with his illness and his pains. The barest necessities had to be considered. It seemed evident enough that she would have to find employment and if need be, live with her mother, accepting for herself and her child the humiliation of dependency.

She wondered if she would allow Julian to pay for the boy's operation. She balked there; the issue was too grave and she slid off to picturing what her life, as it had now finally been determined, would be.

It was still in pictures that Janet mostly thought and through pictures that she derived emotion and feeling. But her capacity for feeling had now spent itself and it was with an almost hard and impersonal detachment that she gazed upon the girl whom she visualised as herself for the future. She saw that unfortunate person at evening time, limp, bleached-out, sodden-eyed, clinging to a subway strap; at night bending, red-faced, over a stove to prepare a frugal meal for herself and her weazened boy, or, perhaps, silent, tearful, and lonely, in her mother's home; in the mornings driving her fagged feet to an office or a shop. There would be no light, no joy, no hope, not even a consciousness of personal rectitude to bear her up. That, she told herself, was what Janet Pierce had come to.

The girl tried to comprehend the manipulations of fate by which she had been brought to her present pass, how she herself had been ensnared. Little by little she thought she encompassed the matter. It had all been in the making for years—since first she had emerged to a consciousness of the world around her, and even, no doubt, before that. Like clouds passing through a grey expanse, her life, the elements which had compounded it, its events, moved across her mind. Outlines may have been blurred, some significances not quite distinct, but she watched, half-fascinated, the procession as it swept by.

There she was—a girl with the endowments which had been given her; from her father, imagination, ideals, a vivid and eager mind; from her mother, vitality, physique, a quality of supreme tenderness; from her environment, taste and the need for a degree of comfort, perhaps luxury. Those were factors over which she had had no control; they had been merely created for her. Thus equipped, she had found herself, without volition, in her own particular world and that world had then begun its grinding process—a process over which she had no more control than she had had in the selection of those endowments which, perforce, determined every one of her acts. After that it had all become matters of “ifs”; and the “ifs” were interminable.

If, for example, her father had not died, she would not have come into her meagre inheritance. If her mother had not been of a soft and yielding nature, she

would not at so early an age have married Butler. If Julian Powell had not become a partner in a brokerage firm, the independent business venture would not have been suggested nor undertaken. If Butler had had it in him to make it go, they would not have quarrelled and Butler would not have turned to Lotta Reynolds. If he had not turned to Lotta, he would not have been guilty of infidelity. If Butler had not been guilty of infidelity, Julian would have never made his plea. If Julian had not made his plea, she would not have discovered her own weakness. Then there were innumerable other "ifs" all along the way; Harsen, the summer in Tuckerton, the baby's sudden illness, Julian's rush to aid her, scores more.

And in the fashioning of the outside forces—forces which, when they had collided with her predetermined nature, with the especial character which had been imposed upon her—she had not had the smallest hand. They had sprung from the innate elements of others. But the impact of these forces with her innate elements was what had constituted her life—the life which, with its sufferings and its despair, she herself had now to live. All the engines of her present misery had been manufactured for her; not the tiniest bolt or screw had she been permitted to fit for herself.

But why, the girl wondered, should her foreordained endowments have ground out in the great mill to nothing better than to the hopeless dross of her present plight? Consider her when she had married Butler, when she had begun, as she then fancied, life. Stead-

fastly her eyes had been set upon all that she had been taught was best; she had striven only by the most high-minded principles; deceit and dishonor she had abhorred. Nevertheless, observe what the world had done! It had stripped all beauty from her life, leaving only the most grim ugliness in its place. Yes, she declared, her life was ugly—a smudged thing.

That, however, it suddenly struck her, was precisely what the world did do to people—smudged them all up or else hardened or coarsened them. There was Butler; how its nasty fingers had laid hold upon him! The kind-eyed, loving clean boy was gone; a gnarled, flint-hearted, irretrievably soiled man had taken his place. Oh, the awfulness of that! Then there was Martha Tremont, with the spark of mercy killed within her. And Julian—poor Julian—it had led him into paths of unrighteous love and betrayed friendships. There was Lotta, hopelessly stained, and Harsen, hopelessly brutalised. Her mother—well, her mother wasn't in life; the world had had done with her, defeating her utterly with much sorrow. So it went, turning the noble to the ignoble, the glorious to the inglorious. No one escaped. The devastating hand touched every one. She herself, try as she had tried, had been unable to evade its vile clutches; and she had tried hard—terribly hard. She wondered if others had tried as hard as she, had thrown up as many safeguards, only to have them insidiously destroyed. . . . For some seconds her mind, trembling like some far northern light, hovered over this speculation. She had an odd sensation of hav-

ing impaled a truth, of having lost it, of having almost impaled it again. She knit her brows in concentration, but her tired brain would not go on and she fell into a sleep of exhaustion and despairing melancholy, telling herself that there was something—something important—that she must think out on the morrow.

When Janet awoke, dancing, crystal-clear sunshine was flooding through the window and a fragrant breeze bulged the curtains aside. For a moment she fought against the tides of existence as they came rolling in upon her again, but at the thought of her child, instinct brought her from the bed to her feet and with a palpitation of worry she set off forthwith down the hall.

The boy was in his crib, Mrs. Fielding beside him. As Janet came into the room, her mother ceased her habitual trick of revolving her thick, old-fashioned wedding ring and, getting heavily up, quavered tearfully toward the girl. The baby was comfortable; Dr. King had gone—departed early with Julian in the latter's car, leaving word that before long he would communicate with Janet; from Butler himself—not a syllable; but from Charles Winter word that Butler was with him and that unless there was urgent need that the young man would not be out until evening. That issue—the issue with him—would come then, the girl reflected, and in connection therewith she realised that

her husband did not know the full measure, not by half, of the crisis which he would have to meet; he did not know that a plug had been misplaced the night before in the switchboard of the Earlmere. Meanwhile Janet was bending over her boy's crib. There was a frightening blueness at the child's temples and beneath his eyes, but he was quiet and there were no signs of present sufferings in his face. She went out.

While she dressed she had no mind for her unfinished speculations of the night before; the practical pull of her own situation, or more particularly, and what came to the same thing, of her boy's, was too strong. The problem of the operation was upon her and it was full of vexations, doubts, temptations, conflicting points. She perfectly well knew that after what had occurred she ought not to permit Julian Powell to assume Dr. King's bill. His offer to do so, she could not help realising, was a part of his love-making and his love-making had been perfidious and blighting. But the boy's need was imperative, more imperative, she thought, than anything else in the world, and Janet believed that she must, for the sake of her soul through all time to come, if anything should go wrong, have Dr. King. And yet, except by the aid of Julian, how was he to be paid? To proceed, to incur the obligation, without seeing how the money reckoning could be met, seemed to her almost as reprehensible as to stoop to the degradation of accepting Powell's help. She thought of her mother and in a panicky way was con-

juring up other possible expedients when she started down the stairs.

As Janet reached the turn in the steps she was conscious that someone was in the living room. She had heard a rustling. Before she looked her heart contracted with fear lest some fresh awfulness was about to be riveted upon her. Below, standing in the middle of the floor, as cool and lazy-eyed as ever, was Martha Tremont. She was dressed in a lively pink and was swinging a parasol and smiling with detached, vague amusement. Janet gasped and halted in surprise. It was months since the sisters had met.

"Hello, Janey," Martha flung gaily up to her. Janet felt herself in no mood either for Martha or her gaiety.

"Oh, Martha," she said stiffly, and proceeded a step or two downward, thinking that here, indeed, was a person who, if she only had the heart, could solve the problem which burned so at the moment.

"I thought I would come to see you," observed Martha.

"Yes?"

"I thought it was about time. . . . Now, kiss me."

Janet's kiss was perfunctory. She drew off and regarded her sister. "About time?"

"Yes—about time," the other reiterated, keeping up her bright, teasing smile. The girl wondered how much of the Pierce family catastrophe Martha knew, but the clear, intelligent eyes bent upon her during the short

ensuing pause, told nothing. "Yes, about time," Mrs. Tremont presently went on, "because there's a chance that you're ready to be sensible?"

"Be sensible?" Janet was bewildered, uncertain of herself, and a little dazed.

"Exactly! But that's not the point." Martha turned away and seemed to move in a fresh shimmering trail of pink across the floor. "I hear from mother the baby's ill," she threw out abruptly and Janet bounded with sudden hope.

"Very!"

"Needs an operation?" Her back turned, and with uptilted head, she was examining a print on the opposite wall.

"Yes;" and the word came very quietly.

"And the business—that dream of yours—I hear it's gone?"

Even more quietly came the girl's assent.

"Well, then," observed Martha, wheeling lightly about, "don't you think you had best go in and have some breakfast?"

Janet passed into the dining room and took her place. Martha followed leisurely and, drawing a chair a few feet away from the table, also sat down. While the maid fetched coffee, she poked at the design of the rug with her parasol; her odd smile did not leave her face, but she did not speak or look up. Meanwhile Janet was trying to collect herself; the surprise of finding her sister and even the slight call of the encounter upon her energies and emotions had left her a trifle weak; re-

motely she realised how done she was. The pantry door closed behind the departing servant.

"You see, Janey dear, you've been such a little fool!" Mrs. Tremont had made her observation with, apparently, the most casual and friendly spirit. The girl's nerves were raw enough to cause her to flare, almost.

"Did you chose this morning to come here and tell me that?"

"Yes," laughed Martha. Janet sipped at her coffee in silence; she wanted to show resentment and yet she did not.

"I saw Butler last evening." It was a simple declaration, but it set Janet trembling. He had been at the Tremonts' house in Tuckerton at about six o'clock, it appeared. Martha's tone implied that Janet might or might not know of the visit; wherein the girl read an acknowledgment that her sister knew of the conditions which for months had existed in the Pierce home. Force of habit made her flush. She tried to reply but was unable to; the short moment ended in her merely staring at her sister.

"Oh, he was frantic!" supplied Martha. "Perfectly frantic—poor boy."

Janet just then had none of her sister's commiseration for Butler. On the contrary, it came to her, in a red flash of anger, that her husband had been at the Tremonts', actually in Tuckerton, within easy distance of his home, his wife, and his child, and that without coming near them he had hurried back for his appoint-

ment with Lotta Reynolds. He had not had even the common decency, she reflected, to attempt to tell her, the person, perhaps, most concerned, of the disaster to the business. He had not had even a rudimentary instinct to stop to find out how their child was withstanding the heat.

"And what—?" she began.

"Oh," supplied Martha, "it was the same old thing. He came, of course, after money—a final last wild appeal. He seemed to think he could still save himself." She shook her head reminiscently and sadly. The girl tingled with mortification; it seemed to her that her folly would never cease its torments.

"Well?" she finally questioned, as much to ask why the subject had been brought up. Her sister shrugged.

"You know how John feels," was all she said. The girl did—bitterly well. It occurred to her that if Martha had by any chance come to help, that in all decency and human kindness, she ought to arrive speedily at the point. She tried to convey this by an unresponsive silence.

"Oh, haven't you got past that nonsense yet!" was how her sister took it up.

"What nonsense?"

"Your childish tears, your childish resentment, your childish ideas about money!"

Into this, especially into the last item of the declaration, Janet read the death sentence of her hopes that perhaps Martha was bringing some sort of aid to the boy; moreover, the entire conversation was operating

only to irritate her. "Well, in your place I should have done it," she declared flatly.

"Done what?"

"Loaned the money."

"Why?"

"Just to prove a little loyalty, a little affection, a little kindness."

"Who for?"

"Well—for me."

"Oh no, you wouldn't; at least not if you had it."

"Had what?"

"Had the money, of course," said Martha.

"That's just when I would have done it," fired back Janet.

"You think so, but you're wrong. You see, there's a difference—you, my dear child, haven't the money; so you don't know what you'd have done."

"Oh!" observed the girl, and as she breathed the syllable some of those galling thoughts of the night before concerning the manner in which the world hardened, the manner in which it beat down the fine and noble things of life, came to her again. Her estimate of Martha had not been wrong; there was no kindness in her soul. It was absurd to hope for aid for her child from that quarter—as absurd as it had been for Butler, and earlier herself, to make their humiliating appeals for the struggling business. Janet's heart was sore and hard and desperate.

Mrs. Tremont got to her feet. "Come in here when you're through," she tossed over her shoulder and

passed languidly into the living room. The girl finished her coffee and presently followed. Her sister—luxuriant, sparkling, at ease—was upon the couch. She drew her skirts a little aside and moved along an inch. "Sit down here," she said gently, "beside me." Something in the other's eye, in her very attitude, prompted Janet to comply. She sat down, but she did not speak. There was a strange, suspenseful silence in the hilariously bright room before Martha began.

It was perhaps half an hour later when she had concluded and Janet, in a violent reaction, was pressing her tear-ravished face against her sister's own. Martha had made her declaration. "So far as it's money," she had said, "you're not to have a moment's worry. Everything the boy needs—doctors, nurses, treatment, care—he can have. He can have it not only now, for a month, two months, a year. He can have it for twenty years if it's necessary—anything, anything at all, that will get him well. We'll see him through. Secure whatever you think is best; it's our affair—John's and mine."

One of her weightiest burdens had been lifted and by most unexpected hands. All of her cruelly overwrought forces poured themselves out in gratitude. It seemed incomprehensible, too amazing—that sudden break in the clouds! And then Martha was explaining and she spoke almost pleadingly.

"Oh, Janey, you've been so blind—so perversely blind," she was saying. "Won't you understand—can't you understand, that there is nothing, almost,

that John won't do with his money, won't let me do, if something is really accomplished. If you only knew what he does! But you never will; he's wonderful; he's stupendous! The great point is, though, that he will not—simply will not—throw money away. He won't palliate situations; if he touches them at all he solves them—cleans them up so that there is no excuse for their recurring. He would never dream of giving a man a nickle or a dime; he might perfectly well give him a thousand dollars. And so it was when you came to us; so it was when Butler came."

"What would have been the use?" she asked, shrugging. "We were certain that the business was bound to lose; Butler, nice boy that he is, couldn't have done it. It would have been the most unintelligent, stupid, cruel thing in the world to have poured money into that sieve. Loyalty, kindness, human affection! My dearest girl, don't you see that that is precisely what we gave you. Suppose we had helped you from time to time. This blow, this failure, which only confirms what we knew was inevitable, would have fallen not now, when you're able to take it, but five, ten years from now, when it would have been that much the harder. Look what mother did—poor, dear, foolish mother! Ah, no, dear Janet, there's a point of view which ought to go with money, and it's not only infinitely wise and sound, but also the kindest and most decent point of view in the world. Don't you see it a little?"

"But," Janet interrupted, a little chokingly, "wouldn't it have been kinder, more decent, to have

told me—said to me out and out what you thought about the business—to have explained, warned me?”

“Warned you? Explained to you? Oh, my darling sister, think, think back! Would you have listened. No, no, and there was just one sensible, kindly, affectionate thing to do for you then. Let you bang your head against the wall, let you burn your fingers, let you get your big fall, let everything smash as it has smashed for you now, so that once and for all it would be over and done for. That was real loyalty, real love!”

Thus the talk ran on. Mrs. Tremont walked around and around her idea, pressed it from different quarters, reflected it from different lights. The facts alone did much to convince the girl; Mrs. Fielding's aid had only been followed by aid from Julian; Julian's aid had been followed only by failure. At least that was how she saw it and there seemed no gainsaying the evidence. But, after all, as she realised, arguments, words, viewpoints, accept them fully as she now did, were not very material. The bold, outstanding, God-given thing was that Martha and John had come, in her most desperate hour, to help in the fight for her boy. That over-topped everything; that proved their affection and how wrong, miserably and unjustly wrong, she had been. Self-reproach and shame battled against fathomless relief and gratitude for the uppermost within the girl and for some moments longer in a great outpouring of contrition and sisterly affection she surrendered herself to Martha's arms, her head upon Martha's shoulder. One peak, she had found, above the tumult of her flood.

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With the tension of her predicament a trifle relaxed and its deep bitterness somewhat relieved, Janet's nerves momentarily sagged. There came to her a staying sense that although there were raging beasts still to fight she would not have to fight them alone. She thought how marvellous it would be if she could only deliver her life and its harrowing problems into someone's else strong, competent hands and merely creep off somewhere and forever sleep. Her respite, her breathing spell, was soothing and precious and she was not at all minded, because she was not ready for it, to rise to the next hurdle which Martha, no doubt without design, almost immediately presented for her.

Loosening Janet's arms and thrusting her gently from her, Mrs. Tremont, with sudden matter-of-factness, asked:

"Where's Butler?"

It was a horrid issue—a revolting prospect to unfold that tale. Besides the girl was not sure that she was willing, at least yet, to do so. She sank down upon the couch and sought time by trying to dry her eyes. Martha was standing above her. Presently she repeated the question. Before Janet was able to key herself up to answer, her sister had added:

"Is he here?"

"No," said Janet, in a scarcely audible voice, "he is not here." She plied her handkerchief without looking up through a long, pregnant moment.

"Where is he, Janet?"

The query had been put with a certain large, portentous gravity. It was a new kind of appeal, at once

raising the matter to a plane of new dignity and importance and, taking for granted their newly-made reconciliation, it asked the girl to put aside reservations of petty pride and to measure up to a mature standard. Martha had never addressed her in precisely that manner before. Janet tried to meet her and raising her face told her, simply and soberly, that she did not know where Butler was. The sisters gazed deep and luminously into each other's eyes. Then Mrs. Tremont turned away.

She straggled off down the room, swinging her parasol, her head down. The girl saw that her sister fully realised that she had come upon another overwhelming situation and was meditating upon it. It was a relief to Janet's pent-up spirit to have thrown the thing, ugly as it was, out into the open between them. She waited expectantly for Mrs. Tremont's next words. Her sister turned about and they came.

"Was he late getting home last night?"

"Late? Why do you say late?"

"He left John and me to dine in town with Julian Powell." The girl rose above the anger which a short while previously had come to her at thought of Butler's Tuckerton visit.

"He didn't go to dine with Julian." She paused and then: "That was a lie!"

Even if her lips had trembled over the words, she had spoken in an even, regulated tone. She saw concern and alarm darken in Martha's fine, critical eyes. Immediately Janet knew that there was now no turning back; that she was in for it and that the heartrending,

sickening, disgraceful mess of Butler and Lotta Reynolds and their relations would have to be disclosed. In some fashion she found herself ready to go ahead; and she did. And to her, more remarkable still, under the influence of Martha's manner and the new and mature note which Martha had struck, Janet did it without tears. She quavered several times and her voice was dry, but not once did she break.

Mrs. Tremont, still standing, her eyes narrowed to delicate slits, heard her through without prod or comment. Janet gave her sister the story from the day when she had found the purloined photograph in Lotta's bedside reading-stand, up through the months of estrangement, to the visit to Mrs. Grier's apartment and finally to the telephone call and misplaced connection of the night before. "Do you know," she said, "when I called up, I knew—knew in the very bones of me—that he'd be there. Somehow, it seemed, when I was up in my room and before I had gone down, that that was the only place in the world he could be. I can't explain, quite, but away inside of me I felt it—felt he just had to be there—and he was."

"Certainly he was!" rejoined Martha brusquely, and again turned away. Janet dropped back on the couch. For a moment she was thoughtful.

"Why do you say that, Martha?" she eventually asked.

"Oh," returned her sister with a hint of indifference, "this thing has been in the making for a long, long time—for a very long time."

"Yes," said Janet, quickly clutching at the idea.

"Ever since we were born." She had spoken with a sort of high, fatalistic sorrow. Martha's guileful red lips turned in half a smile.

"Oh, not so bad as that, I should say."

The girl did not press her point. For a long minute she was silent; her eyes, romantic darknesses beneath them, were down and her brows drawn together. Martha sauntered back and forth in front of her. "Of course," Janet finally brought out with almost a choke, "there is only one thing to do."

"What's that, my dear?"

"Can't you imagine? . . . I can't live with him, I must leave him."

"Leave Butler?" Her sister had wheeled about.

"Absolutely!" and the girl closed her lips upon the declaration.

Martha had come to a stop and was smiling down. "I don't think that's very fair."

Janet, bolt upright, was aghast. "Not fair!" she cried. "Not fair after—after—"

"No," supplied Martha, "considering everything."

"Considering everything? I don't need to consider everything—only one thing."

"Well," agreed Martha, "perhaps that's true—if you consider the right thing."

Janet stared.

"Consider yourself!"

"Me?"

"You, yes—and what you've done."

Mrs. Tremont lifted her glance upon the words. Janet did not reply and heard her sister resume omi-

nously: "Do you care for my theory—my judgment, if you please, on Butler and—his, well, his escapade—now? . . . Or will you wait?"

The girl braced herself. "Yes?"

"Now?"

Janet nodded and her hands on either side of her gripped the couch.

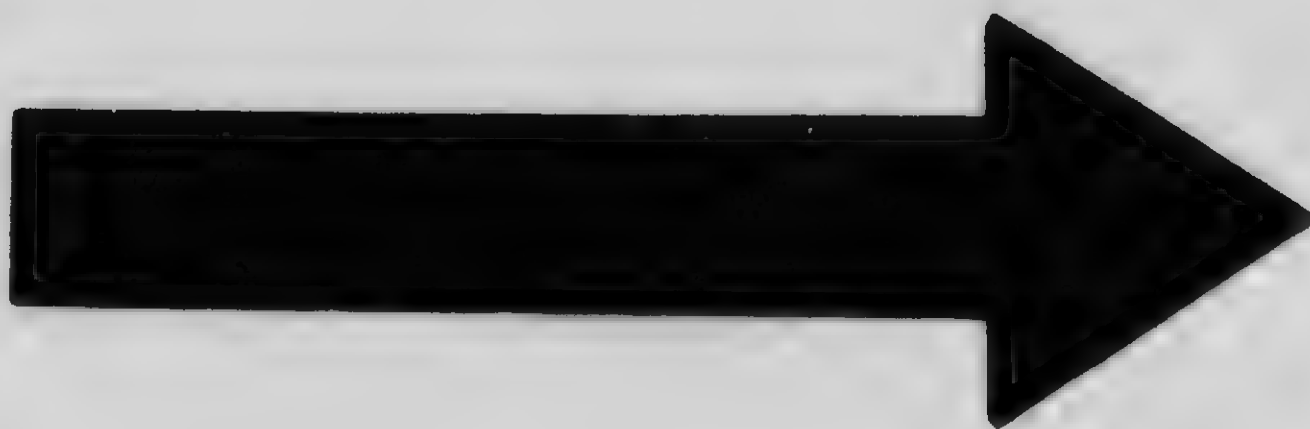
"Very well, then," said Martha, and swung her gay parasol, pendulum-wise as she went on: "I don't think you should even consider leaving him. Keep quiet! Don't tell him that you know he was with that woman last night. He doesn't know now—he couldn't know, about the wrong connection. Say nothing! Everything else will right itself quickly enough. Just bury the fact of your telephone call and your discovery and live your life with him. It'll work!"

The girl sprang up; her whole being was in instinctive revolt. "That—that," she cried. "Never! I couldn't—simply couldn't. After what's happened? Oh, Martha, how could you?"

"How could I?" took up Mrs. Tremont quietly. "You won't like it, but I'll tell you."

She paused. Janet was trembling and holding back tears. "You see, Janey," Martha continued with clear tenderness, "this whole thing—Butler's break-up with you and his mix-up with the Reynolds person—is all, absolutely, completely, finally, grossly, your own fault. It's you who have done it and no one else. You drove him right into the other woman's arms and now—and now you want to make him pay for it."

It was not a new thought to Janet that she had been



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egregiously at fault and had been guilty of prodigious follies. If it had been a matter of an angered hour or two with Butler, even a week or so of coolness between them, she would have accepted of her own accord very nearly a full measure of blame. But to place upon her shoulders full responsibility for the outrage of her husband's months of neglect and hard-heartedness, the ineradicable stain of his culminating infidelity and a wrecked and fatherless home—that was not just! Janet blazed back at her sister.

“My dearest girl,” Martha replied, “blunders never die. I don't know about good acts; if they were good for ourselves, we forget them; if they were good for others, they get lost in the general ingratitude and forgetfulness of mankind. But a blunder perpetuates itself everlastingly and your blunder, the blunder you made when you took that little legacy from Charles Winter, has simply grown up to adult size on your hands and got in its work. I know you meant well—meant wonderfully, in fact. But that's immaterial. The fact is that that blunder—and the blunder is you—you are the one who sent Butler to that woman's flat, perhaps have spoiled his career. It was by the outworkings of your folly that your child was kept here in Tuckerton in the heat. Poverty? Well, before you meddled, the lot of you had at least a fair competence. There's probably more; I don't know.”

Janet was acutely conscious that there was more—several tremendous facts, evolved from the relation with

Julian Powell, which Martha did not know, but she said nothing.

"It's like a fan—a mistake like yours," Mrs. Tremont was saying. "It spreads out in scores of directions. Anyhow, it was you with your ardor and imperiousness and complete inexperience who charted the Pierce family course; you've hit a rock. You're the last one to throw Butler overboard." She hesitated and concluded. "He's more to forgive—yes, a lot more—than you. Recollect a little! . . . Don't you think so?"

Janet did not think so and in after-time she always reckoned the moment which followed, and the moments which followed that, as among her stiffest. At first she was too dumfounded, amazed, staggered for utterance. Tense as a ridge-pole, she could barely gasp. Then she passed through various emotional stages from towering indignation to vehement protest, to tears. She stamped and she pleaded and she cried.

Meanwhile, Martha had sat herself down, crossed her knees, smoothed out her skirt, vivid in the bar of sunlight which lay across it and with cool and blithe detachment, was proceeding, as best she could, against the girl's heat, to argue her case, when the telephone rang.

She answered; it was Dr. King; and that afternoon Janet's sister, in her heavy cushioned, flower-decked limousine, took Janet and Janet's boy to town.

The operation was to be performed in the Tremont apartment the next afternoon.

CHAPTER XIX

UPON A BALCONY

"Oh, Butler, what's the use?"

Butler had made his denial—flat, categorical, emphatic. But Janet, fixed in her conviction not only of his infidelity upon the known occasion, but also of months before that of lying to cover ignominious meetings with Lotta, had for his declaration only an impatient little movement of her hand and that wearied question:

"Oh, Butler, what's the use?"

Her tone had been all of a piece, betraying disgust with this seemingly fresh and wanton unworthiness on his part.

"The use? There's lots of use!" He took her up glaringly.

"After all these months—after the other night? Oh no, there isn't! I'm not so credulous: and besides . . . I forgive you."

She had spoken dejectedly, with the lassitude of her extremity, and getting up, moved away, struggling to hold her lips steady. For the even more passionate protestation of innocence which followed she had only half an ear.

"Then what, will you tell me," Janet asked, facing

about, with over-trying patience, "were you doing at that hour in her flat?"

Without making immediate reply his eyes dropped and he took up a book from John Tremont's desk, beside which he was standing. The girl watched him. Finally he spoke, and with a certain grimness.

"She sent for me," he said.

"Sent for you? Why should *she* send for *you*?"

"She'd read in the papers of the assignment and got word to me through Julian."

"With whom you dined?" and the girl had been unable to repress her deep inner bitterness and scorn.

"With whom I had expected to dine," he corrected, with a glance.

"Oh, Butler—Butler," she lamented. "Well, never mind! . . . What did *he* want?" She saw that he had suddenly become more thoughtful.

"She wanted to know what I was going to do."

"About what?"

"About you."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her for one thing," said Butler, with firmness, "that that depended upon you."

Janet turned away, with a gesture of utter hopelessness. "And it took you till close upon one o'clock in the morning for that?" she declared rather than asked, with a twisted smile.

"No, it did not," answered Butler testily, and there was a long silence.

"Well, then," questioned Janet over her shoulder,

"what is it that you say kept you there until that hour?"

Her husband closed the book with a small bang and, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, walked meditatively to the window. Through another long pause he stood there, gazing out, while Janet, who had again dropped down into her chair, watched him side-wise. At length he was speaking.

"There is no use answering that question if you believe what you say you do. There's no use answering any questions nor of—nor of our trying to go on at all. We're at an end. We might just as well quit where we are. As long as you've got that thing in your mind no existence together is possible. Think of it—we couldn't live with it always between us. Every minute, every hour, we'd both be fearing it was about to crop up. No, no, it's impossible."

"Oh, it's just a little hard at first. After a while a person gets used to everything, I imagine. But there's the fact and I don't know what I can do."

"I'll tell you," and Butler wheeled about.

"Well, what?"

"Believe!"

"What?"

"Believe me." He had let her have it full and straight. Her eyelids fell in weariness.

"Oh, Butler," she said. "I've forgiven you. Isn't that enough? I don't see what more you can really expect."

Another big silence, and then he brought forth

abruptly: "You think I've been lying to you right along, don't you?"

"But I tell you I forgive you," she cried a little impatiently.

"You don't, though. You just say you do. Words! Words! Words!" He jerked his hands out of his pockets and began to button his coat briskly. "My God, Janet," he declared vehemently as he crossed the room to the mantelpiece, where he had placed his straw hat, "you've not got the faith of a flea left in you. You don't believe in anything or anybody, much less in me."

Her eyes followed him. "Oh, well, for that matter I don't believe in myself," she said. "That's why I forgive you—partly."

With his hat in his hand he regarded her from the threshold. Presently he turned sharply about. "Well, we can't even try to go on like this," he snapped with decision, and went out.

This was seven days after Janet, with Martha and the boy, had come into town. It had been a gruelling week, bringing with it for the girl hours of drubbing compared with which any of her earlier hours of self-condemnation and uncertainty had been mild. First in this direction and then in that she had rushed like a hunted animal to find a solution to her difficulty. Before the interview with Butler she had believed that she had hit upon a way out of her calamity. But the scheme had failed utterly; the edifice so painstakingly, so agonisingly built up lay before her in ruins. She

might have been staring at them as she sat there in the chair, her chin sunk in her palms, a little more whiteness to her forehead, a little more droop to her shoulders and listened to her husband's footsteps beat down the echoing hall, and, then, the outer door bang. She was halted dead; Janet could see no manner in which to go on.

The operation upon the baby had been performed. Shortly after noontime, that previous Saturday, the nurses had arrived, honest, sober-faced young women, covering excitement under an elaborate air of calm. They had disappeared and, emerging in their uniforms, had invaded the large, light room of the Tremont apartment. Once Janet had looked in; the walls, hung with sheets, were sepulchre-like; chairs and couch had been pushed away, stripping the place of its air of comfortable habitation; in the middle of the gleaming floor stood an enamelled operating table, proclaiming the business in hand. After a while Dr. King, an assistant, and an anaesthetiser had arrived. The girl had shaken hands with Dr. King, bowed to the others, and without words taken herself back again to the room where the child, mute and patient, lay. Martha then had left her. Once Dr. King walked past the open door; from head to foot he was in heart-rending white and was working a hand into a grewsome rubber glove. A nurse had come; they had taken the child away, and Martha had rejoined Janet. A feeble, muffled cry came once. Life for the girl stood still; she did not speak, much less cry. The sun worked itself around and struck

brightly upon her cheek, but she did not move. Martha was silent; up to the window rose the never-ending murmur of the city, and far off somewhere a hurdy-gurdy played. . . . A heavy, sickly fume of ether rolled about Janet, and quiet, alarmingly measured footsteps were in the hall. Dr. King entered. Apparently the operation had been a success; it would, however, be some days before he could be sure, he had said, that the spine would be straight. The girl had not yet had his final, committing word.

Not only had Butler not been with Janet during the operation, but she had not seen him until that afternoon; indeed, during the intervening time she had not so much as talked to him over the wire. Martha Tremont had by various persuasions kept them apart. "Both of you must get yourselves balanced up," she had said, "and before you start arguing, see where you are!" Janet had acquiesced; she was not ready for the encounter; she wanted time to think. Butler had been inclined to rebellion. "You see," Janet's sister explained to her, "he doesn't know about the Earlmores—your calling him up there, I mean."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, that other men had failed in business before. He thinks you're trying to get used to that blow. . . . He says he'll wait till I send for him."

Accordingly there had been no meeting; Janet stayed with the Tremonts, Butler remained with Charles Winter. He received prompt word of the operation by telephone from Martha, and in like manner regular and

frequent reports day by day of the boy's condition. Thus matters had continued for a week and then had come the interview and the collapse of all that the girl had striven to reconstruct.

In the fashioning of the doctrine upon which she had staked so much, Janet had had a double aim; to bury the past and to find some kind of a workable, living creed for the future. The theory to which she had finally come and put to the test had been fostered by Martha, who had lost no time in resuming the argument concerning Janet and her troubles left unfinished in Tuckerton. Indeed, she had pressed it vigorously, and to that end had had full opportunity. The Tremonts' apartment, spacious, light and cool, had been handed over to Janet's needs and affairs. The baby had room, the trained nurse had one adjoining, Janet had a room, and Martha and John had crowded themselves into a circumscribed place which the girl was certain they had never before occupied. There was at Janet's disposal a maid—one of Martha's infinitely friendly unders.anding maids—and the Tremont butler, very smart in a striped vest, with brass buttons, was always on duty for errands at her ring. If the baby slept no one breathed; if the baby smiled, every one smiled; Dr. King's visits, twice daily, were preëminently the household events. John himself, with a high funereal air, tiptoed in and out, always ready, always eager, a check-book, metaphorically, always in his hand.

The girl was overwhelmed; gratitude, if nothing else, would have made her receptive, and Martha was alert

with her advantages. "I'm not trying to be kind," she insisted, "in any silly, sentimental way. I'm trying to be kind by inflicting pain. No one can pull you out of your hole until you see what you've been." And she told Janet, unreservedly, that she had been a devastating, ruinous force let loose upon her environment with only perverse blindness, selfishness, inexperience, and the supreme egotism of twenty-one years as guides.

"My dear," she declared, "with all your uplift, with all your ideals, with all your consecration to the finest and all that, you've been a blighting thing, and most of all to Butler. If you owe a duty in this world it's to forgive him and take him back."

All of Janet's calamity, she contended, was rooted from the first in the soil of what Janet was. "You wanted success—material success—big things," Martha declared, "and yet it was ridiculously impossible for a young idealist of your particular sort to have picked as a husband a man, any man, who could have brought those things to her. Simply think about it! Look at Butler! Why, the very qualities in him without which you could never have loved him, which led you to marry him and stake everything upon him, were identically the qualities which barred him from all chance of winning. Kindliness, boyish charm, quick sympathies, strong attachments—precisely the traits which the world is quickest to exploit. Can you imagine Butler discharging a consumptive stenographer and exacting the immemorial pound of flesh? I can't, and if you, with all your exaltation over what you thought

the fine things of life, could have, I know to a certainty he'd never have been your husband! My dear, you are one of those peculiarly good people whom it was ordained in the beginning must be failures and cause failures."

"But look at Harsen," pleaded Janet by way of reply. "He was Butler's big mistake. I never told him to take Harsen."

"Of course you didn't, child," retorted her sister. "But can't you see that in the very nature of the case he was sure to find a Harsen—he was foredoomed to one."

The basic fact concerning Butler, maintained Martha, was not so much that he did not possess the driving, achieving ability, but that he was aware, perhaps only by an inner sense, of his lack. It would have been amazing, she thought, if he had not felt, even if only in the most remote crevice of his being, and long before the family's enterprise was launched, a feebleness in affairs.

"No doubt," she said, "he never acknowledged it to himself, no doubt couldn't. But it was there just the same."

And it was that consciousness, asserted Martha, which had prompted him to align Harsen with himself. Harsen had power, a kind of brutal force of will; he was a huge motor truck, heavy as a house, crashing forward, heedless of all save its own destination; a perfect product of amoral single-mindedness and necessity. Following his process of unexpressed reasoning

Butler had hoped to harness that force, Mrs. Tremont contended, to pull himself through by the means of it, to make up with Harsen's strength for his own deficit. "Of course it never occurred to your husband," said Martha, "that sooner or later every one has to reach his own individual natural level and that in the long run no one else could, or rather would, pull him along; and probably least of all did it occur to him that that very power of Harsen's might be turned in its full domineering brutality upon him, as of course, inevitably, it was!"

"And all this while what were you doing?" continued Janet's sister. "Naturally enough, because you didn't know better, the worst thing conceivable. Why, you were stuffing Butler up at every opportunity with the most ridiculous saccharine flattery imaginable. You couldn't help it. With the hot blood of your years you were irrationally in love; with the egotism of an unlicked, unscarred little animal, it never occurred to you that you could have possibly married any one but an able man. You believed that your charming Butler, merely because he was yours, must be a Titan. You enshrined him, you bowed down to him, you worshipped him, but you never looked at him. Instead, you just blindly endowed him with all that a perfectly uncurbed imagination wanted to see there. Really, Janet, it was scandalous, pathetic."

Janet winced, flushed, started to speak, but Martha smiled and raised a long-fingered, silencing hand. "Don't argue!" she enjoined, and went on: "And

that love-born idolatry of yours was like a wonderful drug for poor, ineffectual Butler. His very consciousness of a vital lack half-haunted him and made precisely that kind of blind faith the most precious sweetness in the world to him. A man of inherent power would not have needed it, but to your husband it created the delightful illusion of possessing what he didn't have and, very certainly, most wanted because he didn't have it. Of course, he believed you—took himself at the best possible estimate, which was yours. It was all very fatuous, but it was all very human. And then, just when you had the boy well fed up, you committed another stupid atrocity. You withdrew your confidence—took away the one asset that ever possibly could have seen him through, and the chiefest mainstay to his self-respect and pride. He was wounded and then perfectly logically, perfectly normally, he tried to cover his wounds, and for wounds of that sort the most convenient covering invariably is anger, a reproachful attitude of outrage and injury. You say he has been nasty to you for months? Certainly he has; that was at once retaliation and defence. And you may be sure that he would have kept on being nasty, as nasty to you as he could, until he had found something—success or what might resemble it—to take the place of what you had given him. My dear Janet, you could not have wanted a better balance sheet of Pierce & Harsen than the state of your domestic relations. And can't you see how it all—the failure, his conduct—were per-

fectly inevitable results of your engaging but somewhat unfortunate make-up?"

Janet, after much battering, had told Martha that she might, for the sake of getting on with the argument, be willing to admit this contention. "But neglect, poverty, lost hopes of one kind," she protested, "they're nothing any more. It's easy to forgive them! It's the other thing—that woman—Lotta—"

"Well, what could you have expected?" cut in Martha. "You had forced him into an utterly false position—a place where he never belonged. He was trying to deal with forces with which he was never intended to deal; he was trying to pack loads which he was never born to carry. Naturally enough he was tragically, miserably unhappy. Come to you—explained? Why, Janey, that would have been laughable! To begin with, his gluttoned pride—the pride and arrogance of a man covering a weakness—wouldn't have permitted him to do so, and in the next place, how would you have taken it? Calmly, philosophically, pleasantly? Not much! You'd have stormed, raged, and no doubt rushed off and tried to run the business yourself—done everything and anything except the right thing, which would have been to have foregone all you wanted and had been expecting. No, it is impossible to picture you back in those days accepting what it was intended you should have in life. Of course Butler sensed all that, but his pride, while he had your confidence, and his bravado and bitterness when he hadn't, kept him at the game you had elected he should play. Matters grew worse;

he grew more unhappy. The load increased; his ability to carry it decreased. Then, after a time, the thing, the worry of it, the spectacle of certain disaster ahead and how you would take it, began to snarl up his nerves. He was tortured all out of shape. He had to get out of himself. . . . And there was Lotta, ready to prattle to him about musical shows, while you offered him prayerful exhortations to achievement. Of course he got mixed up with her. . . . I've told you that you drove him straight into her arms."

This and much more the staggered and bewildered girl tussled with. She set herself the definite task of solving the riddle of her calamity and searched in the ruins of the past for a key for the future. Her sister's theory somehow seemed inadequate, unfair. Only in a roundabout way had she been at fault for all that Martha so mercilessly laid upon her; it was stretching matters to say that she alone was responsible for the havoc around her; it was not credible that she was the devastating force her sister said she was. Much more plausible and just seemed her own miserable theory that the world, life, and its soiling, brutalising machinery had wrought the disastrous result. And yet that doctrine did not seem quite right, either; besides it worked out frightfully. Under it one could only lie flaccid, regard one's self as a hopeless puppet of destiny and accept with sullen bitterness whatever fate the grewsome monster of the world might choose to mete out. Such a philosophy gave no coördination or plan to life. It might explain the past, but it killed

the future; and Janet was just a year beyond twenty-one.

But in any case this trying to prove to one's self that one was nothing finer than a misguided, malign force in the universe or else that the universe was an irresistibly debasing thing in itself was at best a disheartening and sickening business. The disagreeableness of her labours, moreover, was not relieved by certain other applications and extensions of Martha's doctrine which the girl herself was readily able to make. The complications with Julian seemed to adjust themselves with a horrible and surprising neatness into the general design, and Janet was contritely linking up that chain of disgraceful circumstances with her own hot-headed, well-intentioned mistakes when Martha projected a side light with information acquired mysteriously by John. It brought into focus the relation which had for a long time existed between Powell and Lotta Reynolds and the termination of it.

"Oh, no, my dear, there was nothing crude nor vulgar about it, as I understand," had explained Mrs. Tremont. "I believe he conducted one of those particularly well-managed brokerage accounts for her, or something of that sort. But the arrangement broke up. That was some time last winter, or in the early spring, John hears. But all that is not the point. Coming to the point, I'm not sure there is one, but I thought I would tell you, anyway. It might help."

She had looked at Janet narrowly, as if to determine how much of an answer there might be, and Janet had

lowered her eyes. The girl herself was at that time uncertain to what extent her follies had ramified into the lives of Julian and Lotta Reynolds. Just then she was really more interested to observe with how little amazement she was receiving the disclosure; somehow it seemed all of a piece with the world she had come to know and she was not surprised. If she had not been a little fool, she reflected, blinded by an absurd innocence, she might have easily guessed the truth and have been able to estimate the moral code of the persons whom, in her ignorance, she had made her friends. But ignorance had betrayed her again and again with endless tortuous twistings and weavings!

All of Martha's arguings unfailingly worked themselves around to one point—forgiveness of Butler, a promise of silence, then and ever afterward, concerning that midnight telephone call to the Earlmores, a chastened and docile reuniting of the Pierce home.

"I don't see why you're so anxious for us?" once declared Janet.

"You don't?" laughed Martha. "Well, I'll tell you, then." She trumpeted with her hands. "Because you're in love," she whispered in the girl's ear.

Janet did not rise to her sister's playfulness. "I'm not sure of that," she said gravely.

"Oh, but I am!"

"Well, I'm not," soberly reiterated the girl. "You see, Martha, it's pretty hard to love a man who for months has neglected you and been cruel and cowardly; who's lied and lied to you day after day, week after

week, who's been guilty of what he's been guilty. Leaving all forgiveness aside, supposing I'm terribly to blame, that doesn't help matters. You see the way I feel about Butler is this—

"Oh, I know how you feel—really!"

"The way I feel," resumed Janet, "is that with a man like that there is nothing to build on—no hope for the future. You can't found anything on him, a home or a life or anything else. He's like soft mud; he's moral quagmire. If I had faith in him, if I only could have faith in him in some little particular, it would be different. But he or I—however you want to put it—has destroyed every last atom of faith I have, and without faith there can't be love."

"Stuff—puerile and absurd!" was the manner in which Martha waved aside this declaration. "It's not faith you need. It's charity—a little plain, ordinary human charity! You've got to begin with that, and all that I've been trying to do is to kill some of your self-confidence, your self-righteousness, your ego, and get down to a proper foundation of decent humility. Goodness, can't you see how easy it was to be tripped up in the way Butler was tripped, until you—Oh, well, never mind, but it just comes to this—that it's always the good people of the world—the people who never slip the moral cogs—who are the coldest, chilliest, most uncharitable, and generally intolerable individuals alive. And what I want to do is to persuade you that you don't belong to that outfit. When I've done that you'll find forgiveness for Butler, and not before."

Martha paused and was thoughtful for a moment before she concluded: "One trouble with this world is that not enough people go wrong."

Janet said not a word, but was telling herself that her sister could never guess how deeply her words had struck. The girl had not disclosed to Martha, even in her most forthpouring hour, that self-revealing episode which had occurred in the strange night hour alone with Powell. Somehow she had been prompted to keep that a secret, but it was uncanny how Martha's argument had developed itself to evoke the memory. Janet could feel acutely again the gentle fan of Julian's breath upon her cheek, the moist press of his kisses upon her lips, the heat of his whole taut body. Her shame burned hot and vivid; she glanced furtively at Martha to see if the other was observing the stinging crimson which she believed must be mounting to her neck and face. She almost broke then under the weight of her humility.

But she did not, and a day or two more passed, during which her sense of stain and guilt twisted itself to a shape even more morbid than before. Martha's scourgings upon her for her part in her own and Butler's tragedies were zephyrs to the fierce winds of her own thoughts. She caught up the unconcluded speculation of the night when she had fled from Julian's embrace and began to demand of herself almost with indignation a reply to the question of why, after she, putting forth every effort, had failed, had been unable to elude the soiling clutches of the world—why should

she so arbitrarily, so out-of-hand, so decisively condemn others? There were hours when a sense of the monstrosity of Butler's wrongdoing would overcome her and her soul would freeze, but these became less and less frequent, and finally, declaring passionately to herself that all mankind sinned, that she owed charity and forgiveness, and that to give them freely to her husband was the least atonement she could make for her own hour of weakness; and that sin and expiation, sin and expiation, in endless iteration, must be life, she yielded completely.

Her surrender came at the end of a long, tense day. The talk with Martha in the rich gloom of John's study had been long drawn out. For more than forty-eight hours the girl's memories and thoughts and anxieties had been besetting her hard. Suddenly, with a puzzling irrelevancy, Martha brought out:

"Tell me something, Janey. You've been very quiet about it, but how far really did that little affair of yours go with Julian Powell?"

It was a final stroke. Exhaustion, tired nerves, hopelessness, despair, more besides, broke her. To ease her spirit she poured the story forth. When she was done, her head was buried in her arms upon the back of the chair, and she was sobbing: "Yes, yes, send for Butler. Let's end it. I forgive him—I must forgive him"; and thereupon Martha withdrew the interdict that had kept the girl and her husband apart, and the next day telephoned to Butler that Janet was ready to see him.

It seemed to the girl then that almost any decision

would have been a gain; she had endured all that she could of uncertainty, vacillation, and indecision superimposed upon her anxieties; to touch ground, any ground, would have been a relief. But she had felt certain that in a broad and generous charity she would have a cloak for the uglinesses of the past and a safeguard against the menaces of the future; that in her new, ennobling doctrine there was solution to the everlasting conundrum of her life and how to live it. By forgiveness she would shroud Butler's wrongdoing and make atonement for her own; by charity she would sustain whatever was ahead. And in this spirit she had met her husband.

Well, before Butler's arrival Martha quitted the apartment. Her final injunction to the girl was to keep sealed her lips upon the damning knowledge she possessed. "It'll only complicate everything," she told Janet, "and make it twice as difficult for you both." This seemed true, and with a firm resolution to silence the girl, beside the desk in John's study, heard the bell ring and presently Butler's familiar step in the hall. Sin—expiation, even if it was a silent martyrdom of years—that was life! Humility, charity, forgiveness—that was how one lived! Her husband entered the room. Inwardly she was trembling and had refuge in idly turning the pages of a book. She felt his scrutiny and his presence, but did not look up. The door closed.

Butler crossed the floor and stood at the other side of the desk from Janet, fumbling at a magazine.

"Well, Janet?" he said finally, in a low tone.

"Well, Butler?"

"We've sort of made a mess of things, haven't we?" he observed. They had not yet faced each other squarely, but from his very voice the girl knew that his spirit, too, had been cruelly chastened and humbled.

"Yes, Butler, we have," she acquiesced wretchedly, and looked at him. Somehow he did not seem the same man she had known; she had an odd sense of detachment from him, of an identity entirely her own, which in a new way, was totally dissociated from his.

"I'm sorry, dear, that you took the failure so hard," he threw out, raising his glance only for an instant.

"Oh, it's all right. It doesn't matter, I suppose."

"It had to come," he said simply.

Janet moved over to a chair, which was turned three-quarters away from him.

"Yes," she said, "it had to come," and sat down.

"I see that now; I'm glad you do."

"Oh, I see it all right," he declared; "Mr. Styce has been going at me for hours."

"Going at you? Mr. Styce? What for?"

"For playing a game I didn't know and wasn't meant for, anyway; for being a fool—generally."

"Well," Janet sighed in weariness, "I was greatly to blame."

"There's no use arguing that; it's passed now"; and then, as if to snap the thread of futile dejection, he added more spiritedly: "I've got my job with Pyncheon & Styce back."

"Have you?" she returned dully. She wished there

had been more animation in her tone, but she was oppressed by an instinctive feeling that the talk was not forming itself favourably; there was neither exaltation nor warmth in it and it somehow seemed that there should be.

"Yes," Butler was reaffirming from his formal distance. "Going back to just where I was before—same job, same pay."

Searching her soul for a spark of some kind, for even a feeble response to his presence and the sound of his voice, Janet, staring into the empty garnished empty fireplace, made no answer. It suddenly came over her that her apathy alone was sufficient to keep him at arm's length. But she had forgiven him; she must let him feel that her soul was softened to him. She tried to speak, but the words halted before they reached her lips. All that she could think of was that that man there had cherished the delicate-limbed, olive-skinned Lotta in his arms. And then she became aware that some sudden emotion was stirring Butler. He had abruptly shoved the magazine from him and was advancing toward her.

"Oh, Janet," he was saying, with thick feeling, "I've been a beast—a beast a thousand times over. I want to tell you so. I want you to forgive me. I'm sorry—God, I'm sorry—but I couldn't help it. Forgive me! Can't you forgive me?"

He was standing hoveringly above her, but he had not touched her. Janet, her glance down, found herself listening critically for him to go on. "Can't we

put everything past—put it all behind and try again? I know what money means to you—what you want. I'll do my best—my very best always, but let's go back. I'll never be mean or ugly! I swear it! Oh, if it hadn't been for that cursed business—Oh, well, you understand, you see! But listen!" And now he became very eager. "We'll go to Meadowhedge; everything was right there. We'll start there again and I'll do better. Just forgive me—please, please!—because I love you and we must, must, try again."

He was bending over her and had seized her hand. She let it rest in his, but it was very limp, and the thoughts which were going through Janet's mind were that he says he will never be mean or ugly again and he says he loves me, but I can't believe him; he didn't say anything about lying or that other thing, but he thinks I don't know; he wants me to forgive him, and, well, I do.

Looking up to him, she said quite dispassionately: "Forgive what, Butler?"

"Oh, the ghastly mess I've made of everything and treating you—oh, you know!"

"Yes—I know." Some faint quality of emphasis which she had given to the words involuntarily alarmed her and she was quick to say again: "Yes, Butler, I forgive you." But her reflection at that moment was that it would have been a mark of nobility in him and an evidence of the reality of his emotion if he had confessed to her all that she really did! . . . forgive. Again, however, she remembered her new need and this

time with more warmth she told him again: "Yes, Butler, I forgive you."

"And we'll begin all over again?" he cried.

"Yes—all over again." Her hand was still limp in his.

"Just as it was before?" he asked tensely.

"Just as it was—before," she repeated slowly, but not looking at him. Of course things could never be as they were before, she recalled.

"My darling," cried Butler and sank down upon the arm of her chair. She felt him pressing against her and his big hand straining at her shoulder. Then he was drawing her tighter and his face was close to hers. Janet wondered what strange thing had happened within her; she felt lax and cold and powerless to move or utter a word; moreover her mind was distressingly clear.

"It won't be so bad, darling, will it? It wasn't so bad before. And, oh, I'll try so hard to make it all up to you for all that I've done and for all that you won't have, but, dearest—Oh, Janet, I love you!"

A hand flattened against her cheek; he turned her face up to his and his eyes burned to her; he leaned closer. She saw his lips form to kiss her own.

"Oh, Janet, dearest!"

That hand had fondled Lotta's cheek! Those eyes had burned to hers! Those words—he must have breathed them to her, too! His lips were now softening upon her own. . . .

Janet never was altogether certain of precisely what

had happened then. Violently agitated, she had found herself standing, confronting him. Butler, a few feet off, had been crouched slightly toward her, with consternation, anger, fear, in his wide dazed eyes. An unsummoned army of emotions, instincts, deep-down things, all the troopers of the past had apparently rushed together and hurtled against her soul. She remembered that her shoulders had stiffened, her lips had closed hard and tight, and that she had managed to twist her head away.

"What's the matter?" he had demanded.

"Nothing!" she had returned.

"What is the matter?" and he had seized rough hold of her arm and, spinning her about, searched into her face. A portentous moment had followed; the silence of the room had seemed to roar; once more he had pressed his demand, and she thereupon had jerked loose her arm and backed away, and presently, despite herself, she had been telling him.

It was then, moving again to the desk, that he had made his denial—flat and unequivocal—and she had met it with the impatient little movement of her hand and her wearied question:

"Oh, Butler, what was the use?"

Some hours later and Janet was standing upon a small balcony of the Tremont apartment, high in the air. It was wearing on toward seven o'clock; the

smoky-blue sensuous evening was thickening and richening around her; a slim, wistful figure in pale white, the girl pushed on with her thoughts.

The interview with Butler and its miserable ending were still uppermost in her mind. It seemed clear enough to her that she had none of those ennobling qualities by which she had believed she had found redemption; there was no real charity, no real forgiveness in her; her own soul had not actually been softened in the least, even by its own stain. Thus the girl reasoned and doubly execrated herself; she had failed to forgive where forgiveness was due and she had failed to make atonement where atonement was needed.

It came over her strongly how actual life was and how little theoretical. Plan, pray, build, until a seemingly stanch edifice had been erected within the heart, and at one small touch of the flesh it crashed down. Was the meaning of that, she asked herself, that the smallest flame of love for Butler had been extinguished? She presumed that that was its significance, but she was not sure. Vagrant little memories of her husband as he had been stirred feelings which denied the conclusion. Oh, if he only hadn't poisoned his very hands and lips! And if only the past had never been. . . . After a time she was telling herself that she did love the Butler of that remote past, the Butler of the kind smile, of the truthful eyes, the unsoiled Butler, but that, as witness what had just occurred, she did not love the Butler of the present. Everything seemed utterly bewildering and uncertain.

The great question, however, was how to go on, how to meet the insistent press of the future, of the next week, the next day, the next hour. Even minutes would not wait for her to discover a way out of her difficulties. Almost any spar, she thought, would do, provided it did not sink beneath her slightest weight. But no spar of any kind was in sight; she was floundering helplessly against the waves which she had to breast and all was black and uncompromising before her.

The conviction, which she had had since soon after the sum of her disaster had been revealed to her, reasserted itself: to cloak the past was more than half of the problem of the future. But, she asked herself, could anything cloak the past? What, for example, could make her forget Butler's cruelty or the monstrous, poisonous fact of his infidelity? Well, many, many years of kindness might. What could obliterate the knowledge that she herself was capable of wanton wrong? Well, years of goodness might. What could blind her to the general awfulness and blackness of life? Years, no doubt, of kindly dispensations without cruel and unmerited disasters. Years, years—and she, as soon as she turned about and passed in from the balcony window, would have to begin existence again; and to begin it in any durable and conceivable way she must believe that Butler was really loving and kind and faithful, that she at the core was fine, that an embracing goodness and rightness did govern the scheme of the world. As it was, the past guaranteed heavily.

against the future, and the future had no guarantee at all.

There was not the shadow of reason to suppose that her husband, once the scare of the immediate situation was passed comfortably, would radically alter his ways, that she herself would not fall afoul of an even greater unworthiness of some sort, that all of her affairs would not slip into an even more revolting mess. . . . Ah, yes, if she could but cloak the past she could go on. But there was the past, as cold and unyielding as the future, and more horrifying than any dream. And just because she knew that the past was not a dream every atom of her faith in the future was gone.

Faith—that was what she needed. With faith and faith alone it seemed could she advance; faith in Butler, faith in herself, faith in her own destiny, faith in the world, and, most of all, faith in her own faith. But the world, life, experience, had killed all her faith and one could not command faith; it was or it wasn't, and with her it wasn't. She remembered how wonderful it had been when her universe had been illumined for her by faith. It had been a false light, to be sure, but how glorious it had made living. She had then believed in everybody, even herself; in everything, even the scheme of things. All had been as simple as the day. Now, as Butler had said, she believed in nothing, and it was dreary, dreary. . . .

Her mind wandered a little and her eyes, no longer fresh in their trust and innocence, turned idly off to the south, where towered those great, tragic hives of

business, seemingly interlaid one against another like a half-shuffled deck of mammoth cards. How inseparably business was woven with life; time was when she had thought of them as strangely different, sharply defined things; they weren't—they were one and the same. Every second some glowing pin-point in the vast, flat surfaces died; another man's weary work was done; she wondered what it had brought to some woman in that broad ocean before her of lighting homes. Beneath, the great thoroughfare reached away in long, pallid convergings of light, dipping into obscurity beneath the crest of Murray Hill. Block after block of motors, in rapid jerks, advanced uptown. To the girl the street seemed more than a street; it was a highway of life along which men and women were rushing to glory and shame, joy and sorrow, pleasure and suffering—a flowing concourse carrying the little human atoms for delivery to fate. . . . Oh, the mere wonder of life; its varying forms, beauties, and ugliness alike, its hopes, fears, loves, hates; winding, interwinding, twisting, turning, like gigantic tides, swishing and washing endlessly over the hanging shoals of existence. . . . And then her mind turned once more upon the sullen mystery of her own life. Faith, she remembered, and thought how, possibly, could she ever have faith—any kind of faith—again? With a super-refinement of cruelty, her own particular destiny had created for her a single overwhelming necessity and then decreed that she could never have that which she most required. . . . But what a snare faith had been

to her feet! It had tricked her, tripped her, worse than played her false. Somehow that did not seem to matter; in her extremity it was the one thing she craved. It was like drink or a drug. It had accomplished her ruin and brought her to nothingness and yet it was all that she then desired.

And Janet, standing there upon the little balcony, high above the animated, sparkling thoroughfare, prayed in the melancholy sadness of the soft September evening for a faith that would give her back her love and her life. . . .

Oh, the complexity of merely being alive!

CHAPTER XX

CHARLES WINTER HAS A CALLER

MR. CHARLES WINTER had just hung up the telephone upon the one side of him and almost simultaneously had placed a finger upon the push button at the other. Leaning forward above his broad, flat office desk, his lack-lustre eyes fixed upon the open doorway, he waited for an answer to his ring. His secretary appeared.

"Byrnes," said the lawyer, "Mr. Anthony Grierson has just telephoned."

"Yes, sir," observed Byrnes obsequiously.

"He's sending an important paper over to me," continued Winter, and added, "when it arrives bring it to me—unopened."

"Yes, sir—unopened."

"And Byrnes, something else, please. . . . Get Mr. Butler Pierce on the wire at Tuckerton. He started early and is likely there by now. Tell him to stay where he is until he hears from me."

"Exactly—until you telephone."

"And one thing more, Byrnes," briskly concluded the lawyer. "Have Mrs. Pierce shown in at once when she arrives."

The secretary withdrew. Winter poked his legs out in front of him and leaning back in his chair tilted his

huge, close-cropped head and raised a lean and bony hand to his chin. Sitting there he seemed quite as diminutive, bleached out and world-weary as usual; and even if he did not appear to be lost in any special gloom he was not finding noticeable enjoyment either in the hour nor in his thoughts. It was well on toward the end of the forenoon and he was considering the distressing and difficult case of Janet Pierce.

The aspect of it which then, as at other times, struck most deeply to him, was its pathos—the inevitable old-as-time pathos of youth, with its hopes and high courage encountering the world. The personal tragedy to the individual of that period of life never failed to evoke his generally reluctant sympathies. To him the spectacle had the repulsion, well nigh, of a bull fight; blinded by natural confidence and goaded on by hot young desires, youth was perennially being sent into the arena for a perfectly certain and almost gruesome wounding; and the more superb the exultant animal was in its vitality and strength, the more vigorous its charge and the harder its fall. It was the weaklings who escaped lightly. If girls like Janet only had the least chance from the first, if they could only be guided, the conflict might not have seemed so unfair. But that had forever been impossible and there was nothing for it but to watch them thresh madly about and be glad when the thing was over. The distressing fact concerning his young protégée was that evidently her struggle was not over.

Two days earlier Winter had once more entered ac-

tively into the girl's affairs. Before that, for a week, he had, after a fashion, been keeping an eye upon and administering to her interests; that is, he had been keeping an eye upon Butler Pierce and administering with certain platitudinous philosophies to the young man's somewhat dilapidated spiritual well-being; and in so doing the lawyer had felt that he was serving the girl. But not until Martha Tremont and Butler, himself, had separately, but both, with the utmost urgency, sought his practised aid, had he felt himself little more than a bystander in the crisis.

"I'm at my wits' end," Janet's sister had telephoned one evening. "She's clean done and I can't help her. It's Butler—mostly, I think. Talk to him but, anyway, do something."

The injunction to talk to Butler had been unnecessary. Upon the moment when the lawyer had entered his house a few hours earlier the young man had been upon him with almost choking supplications and an account of a disastrous interview that afternoon with his wife. "My God, Mr. Winter," Butler had cried, "she believes anything and everything of me. She talks about forgiveness, but how can she live with me—how can I live with her—if she thinks I'm every kind of a rotter? I believe we're going to end in a smash—in a real smash. It's as terrible as that. I must prove I've been straight with her—that I'm not all bad. For heaven's sake, help me—help us both."

These appeals had set him in action and principally from Martha he had gathered details. When he had

learned that Janet was trying to command some kind of faith with which to go on he felt that he could be of little real use. To him that simple fact was a sure index to the seat of trouble. It signified that his protégée was still enduring her youth and had not yet freed herself from its ugly throes; for, to Winter, not only was faith inherent in youth, of the very nature of it, at once its symbol and scourge, but need or desire for faith was evidence that understanding had not yet come. If understanding had come, it was his conviction, there would be no yearning for the other.

The two were in all regards incompatible. The one was dishonesty of the mind; the other was supreme honesty of the mind. Proclaiming the goodness of everything, faith fostered illusion, false hopes, irrational dreams, utter dejection of spirit. Understanding, denying the absolute in anything, carefully circumscribed hopes, and established an honest comprehension of self, of others, of life, of its terms for the individual and most of all a realisation of the inevitability of the terms. Then arrived expectations which were not certain of disappointment, an acceptance of one's assigned place in the universe and no desires beyond worthily filling that place and in due process, serenity of the soul. That was what understanding meant to Winter and he believed that it dispensed, root and branch, with faith, the poisonous and weedlike growth of immaturity, and all necessity for it.

He wished he could help Janet out, give her some hint of the nub of her difficulty. But he thought that any

such effort would be futile; youth repelled guidance and its ears were always deaf. That, to Winter, was the cause of its major tragedies. Moreover, understanding, like most heritages of maturity, had to be come by alone; it was a condition of soul and not some facile philosophy which could be set afloat upon the surface of the mind. It had to be woven into the individual's being and each individual must perform the task unaided.

Meanwhile, however, Janet's condition was evidently extreme and the lawyer was now about to palliate it. He was going to give her back a solid measure of faith in her husband. Being an inexorable theorist it would have been more to his inclination, perhaps, not to have done this until the girl had hammered her own way out of her plight. He believed that Janet, with a matured understanding, would forgive Butler, despite her exaggerated estimate of his lapses; would see how little blameable any person ever was for even his most unrighteous act and give due credit to the dragging grip of circumstance; view Butler as a part of her lot in life and realise that her very nature would probably cause her to blunder if ever she should attempt matrimony, again; would recognise that the pain to her of her husband's wrongdoings was probably counterbalanced by the pain to him of hers, even if hers were less monstrous; would, by reading the past, acknowledge that they both had moved without the prevision of experience and do her utmost to safeguard the future; put much down to the outcroppings of an unnatural strug-

gle conducted upon a level to which they had not been destined and balance the score by remembering that it was one of the iniquities of the universal scheme that people could never escape completely from the calamity of blind youth; and finally would start afresh by expecting modestly of the future and by attributing the worst of the past to the unpleasant, abnormal contortions of the unfortunate time which would then have passed. Along such a road Winter thought Janet would find not only forgiveness for Butler and solution of that problem, but a general working creed by which she could go on. It would be eventually best for her, he told himself, to let her now, at this time, torture her way through to that kind of understanding. But at present her case was so extreme, her predicament so painful, that he had waived all theories, and the day of real cure for the disease of youth was to be postponed; she was to have a palliative, the only palliative that there was for the disease—a large item of restored faith. At least she would know that in the circumstances upon which rested her conviction of Butler's infidelity, her husband had been guiltless; the document Grierson was sending assured that.

After Butler's appeal for help, Winter had begun scouring over the affair at the Earlmere. Before then, for a week, there had been a reticence between them concerning it which forbade questions and did not invite explanations. Until then, as a matter of fact, the lawyer had not wanted the facts; as long as Janet's ignorance had been apparently complete, it had seemed

easier to him to say nothing and bury the miserable business as deep as possible. The sum of his knowledge then had been that, acting upon a reluctant parting hint from his dinner companion, Powell, he had, after other resources had failed, and after an hour or more of troubled hesitation, made inquiry as a last expedient, for Pierce at the Earlmere, and had actually got into communication with him there in Mrs. Grier's apartment at the hour of twelve forty. Lotta Reynolds' sort, he knew; Anthony Grierson he knew well and the woman was no doubt, he thought, but another of Tony's magnificent irregularities. Beyond that Winter had not cared to go; he did not want to be too well informed. But when it had appeared that Janet's ignorance was not complete and her husband had sought to enlist his aid, the lawyer had told the young man the price of assistance would have to be a full version of the facts.

It was not an unusual narrative which he got—a narrative of lives knocked askew by circumstance and crossed by mistake. It began with a broken dinner engagement, called off by Powell for the sake of a business talk with the lawyer himself, of the dread of a beaten man confronting his ambitious wife, of desperate need, if only for a few hours, to escape a vision of what had seemed ahead. To Winter all that had been remarkable, and ill was, was in the culmination reached in those hours in the Earlmere, when Janet's husband, unconscious of the other dark crisis being enacted in his home, was resisting the woman's entreaties,

seductions and tears to rescue her from the pit of disgrace and despair into which she had fallen.

"What did she want you to do?" the lawyer asked.

"Run away—start fresh somewhere together—all that sort of nonsense, you know. She seemed to think that both of us had played ourselves out here and that Janet was sure to throw me over for—for someone else."

"Who?"

"Well, well, of course, it was absurd, just an idea that the Tenderloin breeds, but she thought, perhaps—for Julian."

"Powell, eh?"

"Yes, she thought Julian was fond of Janet and that Janet wanted—oh, it was horribly sordid and low-minded! Of course, Julian and Lotta did break up, but it wasn't on account of Janet."

"On whose account then?"

Butler had hesitated a long moment. "I guess it was on account of me."

"Of you, eh?"

"Julian got jealous or something. He found out about some fool photograph and got crazy or jealous or something and busted everything up."

"I see, and then she had to do something and so she took up with Tony Grierson."

"Yes, that was it; it simply wasn't in her to do anything else. Before then I had some sort of talk with her—same kind of thing as the other night, only not as bad. I told her that time that I thought if the business worked out maybe matters between Janet and me would

change. Pretty soon I heard she had moved uptown. I never saw her again until everything had smashed up. That was the other night."

"Well," had inquired Winter, "what did you tell this lady when she wanted you to go off with her?"

"Oh, I told her—no." The lawyer recalled now the simple, naïve, matter-of-factness of that declaration from the young man. "I told her—no; and then she began doing all sorts of things—crying, begging. I kept trying to leave, but she always had something else to say. I'd never have got away if you hadn't called up. I felt too sorry for her."

"You felt sorry for her?"

"Oh, yes, awfully. She'd had a good deal of hard luck and besides I'd always liked her; she was cheerful. But as I kept telling her all the while—I was married. She never seemed to realise that."

Even during the recital Winter had known that he was getting the truth; in critical judgment he had appraised every syllable as it had fallen from Butler's lips; not an accent had failed to bear the stamp of verity. He himself was convinced, but it was immediately apparent that for Janet's ravished credulity more was needed. In that predicament the lawyer had preyed upon his acquaintance with Anthony Grierson and by a variety of soft, subtle persuasions, peculiar to the interlacings of the business world, and which now evoked a smile, had prevailed upon that gentleman to procure what, knowing the breed and its ways, the lawyer had been certain Mr. Grierson could secure—a re-

liable, if need be, attested, statement from his personal underling and secret eyes, the so-called maid of Mrs. Grierson's apartment. It was that document which was now on its way to Winter. He knew in advance what it would contain and he waited for it, sitting there at his great desk and seemingly lost in his own big room and wondering about a variety of things.

The paper arrived before Janet. Byrnes brought the commercial looking envelope in and handed in to Winter. The lawyer opened it and spread out the small-piece of cheap stationery. The handwriting was less ill-formed than he had expected; the woman had evidently some intelligence. Men like Grierson, reflected Winter, seemed to have little need of romance and illusion in their lives and always engaged sound ability in their affairs. Odd, that stripe of man, efficient and material to the last ditch! In two glances he ran the first page through and in two more the second. It substantiated Butler; it was convincing; it would palliate Janet's case—give her the unfortunate opiate of faith.

He laid the paper down and continued to wait. Glancing at his watch he saw that she was already overdue. His eyes kept lifting to the doorway in momentary expectation that she might be framed there. There was vividly before him a picture of the girl as, upon the occasion a year ago, she had hesitated for an instant, palpitating, in that very spot, before she had swept in upon him like a dash of spray. Ah well, like other glories, the glory of fresh young life passed away;

its bloom brushed off and its sweetness died; cheeks faded and eyes dulled; living was unlovely, a most un-aesthetic process! The gorgeous little animal who had bounded at him twelve months ago, buoyant and glowing with hope and desire, fragrant with a clean, soft innocence, without scar or stain, would now enter a little listlessly, more slowly, anyhow, with a vaguely despirited air and a reluctant smile. She would no longer seem to sparkle with the enchantment of being alive. The thought of a change like that was remotely saddening and Winter glanced down again at the paper before him. . . . Well, Janet had wanted faith and there it was whether it were best for her or not!

An odd grin relaxed the lawyer's pulled features and there was a sudden glint of amusement in his blurred eyes. He was telling himself that there was a ludicrous topsy-turviness in life. One day one was striving to build up what the day before one had been spiritedly tearing down; one day one was preaching this doctrine and another the next. No one could ever tell upon which side he would shortly find himself arrayed and the world after all in its mysterious operations really did make everyone little more than a ridiculous puppet. But the chance of the event was always interesting and here was he—confirmed expounder of the untrustworthiness of all things mundane—about to offer, yes, positively preach, faith to—it was diverting!—to Janet. Engaging spectacle, but thoroughly in keeping with the whimsical, comic pattern of life in general! Well,

it did not matter; did anything really matter. . . ?
And he looked up.

Janet was there. For a second they gazed across at each other. He saw her nod at him and richly smile and move with warm presence into the room. In the instant she was like a rose after a storm of rain; and then in a flash, with a joyous bound of some strange tight thing within him and before the girl had spoken a word, he knew that the great goodness had come to pass. The case of Janet Pierce was at an end. She was a woman.

The events of the next hours of that day are treasured in the most precious archives of Charles Winter's heart. Whenever he wants to warm his grey, meagre soul a bit he thinks them over. Sometimes he talks them over; that is with Janet upon some tender summer's evening when he has motored out to Meadowhedge and they are together upon the tiny little porch of the stucco house and Butler is inside keeping his conscientious tab upon the baseball scores. But for the most part he reserves the memory for those spiritless night hours when he has pulled through some heavy job of work and his mind keeps spinning too hard for bed and he is still at his chronic brooding over the mystery of life and things in general. Then in his loneliness he delights most in them.

From the moment when Janet came into the room that day she was wonderful. There was not a second's

doubt that the paroxysm of youth had passed, that the great re-birth of the spirit had come. She was calm, not tumultuous; sober and steady, not headstrong and propelling; there was depth where there had not been; she seemed to exist in a new and infinitely finer aura; it was as if some baser metal in the alchemy of the world had been turned to gold. In her the lawyer found a glow of the spirit and not of the flesh; an enriched luminous being was with him and deliciously nearing him, gentle with the gentleness of pain, not tired, but pallid, with wisdom and the distress of getting it. Her eyes did not snap, dance, and cavort; they were even and level with knowing and joyously soft with a sympathy far more appealing than her trusting innocence had ever been.

She moved to a great leather chair beside his desk. Before she had sat down Winter was telling himself that here in reality was the being upon whom he had been bestowing his affection and care; in some mysterious, subconscious manner he had managed to project through the blur of the crudities and harshnesses of her girlhood a vision upon his mind of what the woman would be; and the woman was there. But it had only been a vision until then; now it was a vision come true in the full perfection of its beauty and grace. The vision was alive and more; it was shimmering him a bewildering smile.

Her first words were: "Dr. King came this morning." Her countenance was marvellously radiant. "The baby's all right."

As she continued Winter had a sense of beaming at

her rather ridiculously and vacuously. The physician, it appeared, had made his daily examination that morning and given his unequivocal verdict that the boy's spine would be straight. There were more details to which the lawyer kept nodding through his nebulous haze of delight; something concerning no necessity even for a plaster jacket or in what vertebra the trouble had been. All the while he was noting a new smoothness in her lustrous features and a new control of her tones. And then she was asking him why he had sent for her and saying that she was sorry she was late.

Winter roused himself and reached for the Grierson report. The paper seemed somehow hopelessly sordid as he held it in his hand and began his explanation. For a moment she listened with subdued amusement. And then she cut him short.

"Don't trouble, Uncle Charles—we don't need to go into that."

Nevertheless, he reached the document toward her. She motioned it away, shaking her head.

"It wouldn't really—that is, really—matter much," she went on, "what twenty of Mr. Grierson's peeping lynx-eyed maids might say. It would be easy enough now for me to forgive—truly forgive. You see, Uncle Charles, I've come through." She paused and her eyes, clear as the day, smiled to him.

"To—er—understanding?" he threw out. "To—ah—"

"Yes, I guess that's it," she laughed. "Anyhow, I'm done with youth. I think I can begin now."

"Begin what?"

"Begin to live."

After she had said it she sat quite still, watching him. Her very presence had become restful. Winter regarded her. When he got up he stood above the girl and took both of her narrow, yielding hands in his. She lifted her untroubled face up to him. He had an impulse to draw her to her feet and kiss her; but only an impulse. Finally he spoke.

"Well, my dear," he said, "there'll be nothing—nothing—for you in life quite so hard. Your meanest tragedy is over. You'll never have to fight blindfold again. You will have hurts, but they'll never be so bad. I'm more than—well—glad!"

Again Janet smiled. She took away her hands and for some moments while they looked at each other with a volume of comprehension between them the warm and affectionate silence continued. Then her smile broadened and she said with a hint of gaiety:

"Really, Uncle Charles, there's only one thing I want to know any more."

He was alert and just a trifle pleased. "I'll help you if I can, my dear," he told her and waited.

She blushed faintly.

"Where's Butler?" she brought forth. And by way of an answer he picked up the telephone.

It was on the way out to Tuckerton in his car that Janet gave him her story. For the most part she had performed her charming miracle for herself. "Just

laboured through it as best I could," she explained to him. "Tried to make my life and ruined it. Ruined my life and there I was—found I'd made it." But she had had to touch a very low point first, she declared, and spoke of an evening when she had stood on the Tremont balcony and actually surrendered. Upon occasions before then she had thought she had surrendered; not until then had she known what surrender really meant. Everything had seemed to stop; she had seemed to suffocate in a thick, vaporous misery; not only had she been exhausted, but the final resources of mind and soul had been exhausted, she said; when she had gone in she had been able to endure only a short talk with Martha and then had gone to bed.

"Well," said Janet, crossing her legs in the ample depths of the limousine and facing Winter a little more directly, "it was about half-past eleven when one of Martha's maids knocked. I didn't answer at first. Somehow, do you know, I was half afraid to. But she kept at it and tried to whisper through the door; someone up front wanted to see me and wouldn't give any name. Then I was perfectly sure that some frightful thing had happened. Imagine—eleven-thirty, everyone in bed, Butler, goodness knew where, and—and a mysterious caller for me!"

Janet laughed and paused; the lawyer's eyes never left her face. She smoothed out her skirt and resumed: "Somehow the first thing that occurred to me was that Butler had—oh, done some awful thing. You see, I'd been a little beast to him that afternoon."

"I gathered as much," put in Winter.

"He told you?"

"Most, I think."

"Well, I had been a beast and I went flying down the hall, my hair down, pulling on my wrapper and in horrible fear. I hadn't any more than got the wrapper on when I reached the door and—and there she stood."

"Who?"

"It seemed incredible then," pursued Janet, with rising vivacity. "It was Lotta Reynolds and, Uncle Charles, never in my life have I seen anything so ravishing!"

Winter grinned, but his grin was less for what she had said than for his amusement at the finesse of the pause she was making to let the words sink in.

Janet then described the scene. "She was in the very middle of the floor," she said. "There was just one light on. The walls are grey anyhow, but the whole room looked a mass of greyness and Lotta—in a low neck—oh," and she grimaced and raised both hands, "oh, a very low neck, with her black hair high on the top of her head and no hat, was standing there and wearing the most gorgeously wonderful, beautiful cloak I've ever seen or dreamed of—all red, a little lighter than autumn red, with a dark collar that got lost up around the neck. The coat was very long and it made her look ever so tall and in that grey room she simply stood and looked at me with those big, dressy eyes of hers. Oh, wonderful, Uncle Charles, wonderful!"

"I daresay," observed Winter drily. "But go on!"

"Of course!" Janet good-humoredly admonished herself. "Well, I think I'd been half asleep; I was frightened anyhow and altogether I was too amazed, too puzzled to do anything except to hang to the side of the door and gaze at her like a stupid little fool. That's what I did! Think of it—Lotta coming to see me at that hour of the night. If I was going to get angry then I didn't have a chance. After a couple of seconds, I could half see her coming toward me—all tall and red, like some new kind of a rich and expensive ghost—and I hardly realised what it was all about before she had me in her arms and was weeping frightfully and crying, 'Oh, you poor little kid! oh, you poor little kid!'"

Winter turned his face away and screwed it up, trying to determine just how well he liked the idea of Tony Grierson's mistress caressing his sanctified Janet. But Janet was going on; the two had had a talk, it appeared, in which Lotta had done all the talking.

"Of course, at the time," the lawyer's companion explained, "I didn't believe a word she said. How could I? That was what I kept saying to myself—how could I? A woman like that! Well, what it all seemed to come to was that Butler—poor boy—had rushed off that afternoon and telephoned her to see me at once and deny things. She had had to go to the theatre or something and hadn't been able to come before. But she said she had come for something else besides. It was for something she had wanted to tell me for months and then once when she *did* have the chance she didn't

because, she said, she thought matters had got so bad between Butler and me that she was what she called 'entitled' to another try—try for Butler, I mean. Horrid! Ugh!"

Janet wrinkled her brows, struggled and went on more quietly. "Her point was that she never made a move until we'd rather busted up and she saw Julian getting—well, getting himself in deeper with me, or getting me in deeper with himself—either way, you know. Not nice, either, is it, Uncle Charles? And Lotta was rather confident of Julian, that is, was confident of Julian's getting what he wanted and went after and all that and—"

The lawyer was sorry for her in her embarrassment. "All you're trying to say," he put in, "is that she wanted to tell you was that on each and every occasion Butler had resisted her not inconspicuous and negligible charms and behaved like a real husband and a real man."

"Yes, that was it," assented Janet, "and that real husbands and real men were awfully scarce and that in the future she would go what she called her 'gilded way,' and let me go mine with Butler and, not because she had the least scruples about anything or me, but because it wasn't any use doing anything else and that if I weren't a kid and a fool I'd take Butler back with— with both arms."

"To all which," interjected Winter, "you being a child, reasoned that there couldn't possibly be either truth or wisdom in such as Mrs. Grier."

"Exactly! Poor Lotta! She's done the best she

could with what she had and what she hadn't and with that wretched marriage of hers which she made when she was young. Really, in some respects, I think she's quite fine!"

Winter gasped, but said nothing. He admitted to himself, the world being what it was, that it was conceivable that Janet was right. "I'm afraid," resumed Janet thoughtfully, "I was awfully rude to her at the end. I must write to apologize and thank her for coming and especially for just the last thing she said. That was what started me off. Later, when I got thinking it over, I found myself on the track. It was right at the door and she, in that idolatrous cloak of hers, was drying her eyes and I, in my dressing gown, was watching her, probably like some silly statue of self-righteousness. She turned about and told me to be careful. I was looking at her just as offishly as I knew how when she plunked it at me that one way and another more than half the people in the world did exactly what she had done—ruined their lives without knowing it—mind you, without knowing it—before they were twenty-five! . . . Terrifying idea, isn't it?"

Winter was silent. He did not look at Janet and he knew she was not looking at him. Presently she added: "She went out then," and there was another pause, full of solemnity for the lawyer, before he heard her conclude with a remote note of sadness. "I don't suppose I'll ever see her again."

"Well," observed Winter, "it often happens that

the people who've had most to do with our lives are the people whom for that very reason we never see."

"I suppose so," concurred Janet absently, and he could see that some sort of a mood was heavy upon her. He did not prod her on with the narrative of her enlightenment. The machine slipped purringly and evenly along. They were running now through the park, rounding the modulated curves and nearing the turn and drop which would let them out upon the clattering thoroughfare. It was an amazing day, with a peaceful breeze and more peaceful sun; upon the grass, still vividly green, edging the twisting grey walks, babies tumbled and rolled. Disheartening reminders, no doubt, thought the lawyer, to that tragic row of the old, the sick, and defeated slouched in the benches behind! He glanced at Janet and noticed a fine dignity in the high color of her throat. Beneath her collar he watched the small throbbing of a tiny, delicate pulse. It seemed strangely to convey to him a poignant feeling of how warm and rapturous could be womanhood and life. He let his mind luxuriate as it would and waited for Janet to break the rich pause. They scudded out of the park and climbed over to Riverside Drive. The Hudson towered and gleamed away to the north in strong, noble lines that seemed to have in them the vigor of a nation. Passion, age, death—the lawyer was cogitating—how easy it was to cope with them in comparison with youth. Then Janet was speaking.

"I don't think I need to explain," she began, and faced him very soberly. "I think you know—know the

kind of feeling about everything that I've come to have, most of all I guess about Butler and myself. The moment I began to think that even the most horrible things which Butler could have done or I could have done really didn't signify much, I began to feel that I had landed on honest ground. Soon I got to looking at the whole Lotta affair—even in the foolish way I had imagined it—not as any real expression of Butler or what he was way inside of him, but as an unreal expression, as a kind of excrescence, not of the man, but of youth; as a false note he had struck and which was false because he was young. It was, as I thought about it, more and more a thing absolutely apart from his true self. And, poor Butler, what hasn't he had to endure! He hadn't learned—he couldn't have learned—to know himself and of course then he couldn't cope with himself and that pride of his and most of all—"she almost twinkled as she ended, "most of all, me."

The lawyer grinned, but kept his peace. He wanted to hear more of this from her.

"Well," she resumed seriously, "in the same way there were lots of things I'd done myself which were not me in the least. They were my youth. In doing them the real in me hadn't come out at all. It was exactly the same as with Butler. I know what he really is; I think I know what I really am. Just for that reason everything is going to be all right; oh, more than all right! Youth, the minute it was put to the test in living, simply twisted us both out of shape. Why, don't you see, Uncle Charles," and now she

seemed to lift herself gloriously toward him, "don't you see that that was the riddle of the past, and don't you see how easy it was when I saw matters straight to forgive—to forgive anything, even the worst thing Butler had ever done, and to forget completely the worst thing I'd ever done, and most of all that it—it simply made me, well"—her eyes dropped—"well, care just twice as much for Butler."

"Yes, I do!" vigorously affirmed the lawyer, conscious of an unusual fluster. "I do see! He was finer! Youth was squeezed out of him!"

"Exactly!" she caught up, "and out of me, too, and we have been beaten and pounded until we are fit to live and fit to live together. And then what hadn't been youth, I said, was the way circumstances bend and keep bending—well, no one gets away, do they?"

She threw her hands up in a small, completing gesture and, folding them, rested back into the cushions of the car. Winter smiled at her; he was well satisfied.

Several sapient observations concerning sin and its hardly traceable connection with the rightness of the human soul were upon his tongue. He withheld them; they seemed superfluous. But he did not take his eyes from her and went on delighting himself with the tilt of her narrow-brimmed hat and the smoothness of her hair beside a small pink ear. She seemed suddenly to have become better to look at than ever; she had improved in all regards and was real. It was no doubt to break his absurd scrutiny, he reflected, that very presently Janet picked up her story again and told him that of

course she hadn't come to all that at once. It was a process which had had to go on for more than twenty-four hours before she had been able to develop her saving idea.

"Oh, but when it finally did come," she cried, "why, it was like a flash! It was away on toward morning. I hadn't slept much—worrying and thinking, you know—and I was watching a little oblong box of light beneath the curtain get a little greyer and greyer and then blue began to come into it. My mind was just running on—there was nothing very conscious in it all. On and off it occurred to me that if only I could believe in Butler that maybe it would be worth while to try again. But everything seemed vile and tasteless and terribly futile, when quite unexpectedly"—she sat a little straighter and opened her eyes wider—"quite unexpectedly, Uncle Charles, it came to me."

"The whole thing?"

"The whole thing—?" she asked, a little uncertainly.

"Oh, I mean how ridiculous it is," he supplied, "to go around trying to keep faith in people and things; how much better it is to recognise universal fallibility and to be content with understanding—really understanding—what it is in each case that causes people to seem to fall to pieces. Out of a clear mind comes all true nobility, true forgiveness, true everything, and—"

"Oh, I know that it's all there," she interrupted jubilantly, "all the philosophy I'll need to go on with!"

"Oh, my dear," said Winter sadly, "all that you'll

need will never be there. You've made your start, but the getting of it is life."

This sombre note checked Janet for a moment, but only for a moment, and presently she was going on to tell him of how, after that, and that, it turned out, was only this morning, everything had seemed to fall right and wonderfully. It was, Winter observed, as if the pattern of her life having changed, all the little pieces had begun darting about to find their new places in the scheme. The first was the physician's heaven-sent word. It was barely after eight o'clock, Janet told him, when she went, still heavy-hearted on the score of her boy, but already steadier in mind, to the child's room. Dr. King, on an early round of calls, was already there.

"He was sitting on the edge of the bed," she continued, "and, oh, how strong and sure and clean he seemed! With one of those surpassing hands of his—aren't doctors' hands fine!—with one of them he was spanning Sonny's wrist—the thinnest little wrist you ever saw. When I came in all he did was just to look up and nod."

Her voice was none too steady and the lawyer saw her eyes swim. He turned his glance away and patted her arm once or twice with an affectionate touch.

"Well," Janet quickly resumed, "I knew everything was all right after that. But he was going on explaining things to me when Martha came in with the message from you and the doctor hadn't any more than finished when—lo and behold!—I had another caller.

And of course," she laughed, "all this time there was only one thing I honestly wanted to do."

"Telephone Butler, I suppose," he teased her.

"You suppose rightly, my dear Uncle Charles," she gave him back spiritedly, "and then when I did have a chance to get to the telephone, of course, he had left your house without a word and—"

"Yes, yes, I know. But this caller?"

Janet hesitated before she said in an odd, quiet voice and very simply:

"It was Julian."

She turned her face, large with solemnity to him, and straightened in her corner as if to give importance to her words.

"And it took him to show me how tremendous Butler is! Not only had I been a fool about that dinner engagement—of course Butler had an engagement, when he said so, that night with Julian, and had never lied to me at all—I don't believe he's ever really lied—but there's more!"

"Oh, I think he's tremendous—don't worry!" agreed Winter promptly, almost hastily.

"Tremendous? I should say he was! But most tremendous when I thought him least so; most glorious when he failed. And, Uncle Charles, don't laugh at me . . . I'm proud that business went to smash."

This was a bit staggering for the lawyer. There was no especial reason for pride in the facts of the catastrophe as he knew them. Butler's notes at the Excelsior Trust Company had fallen due; for some

time before that, because of a parting shot from Harsen, who upon the occasion of his retirement, had deprived the concern of all its working capital by availing himself of his check-signing prerogative and surreptitiously paying every item, large and small, in sight, his balances had been wretched. Moreover, having paid Mrs. Fielding, Butler had not been able to offer the bank even a small payment in reduction. It was, therefore, natural enough, it had seemed to Winter, that the notes had been called, and natural enough, too, that Harsen should have at exactly the most propitious moment emerged from his hiding place in Brooklyn and thumbing out the very funds paid to him a few months earlier by Butler, succeeded in getting possession of the entire enterprise. Far from offering any aspects of the heroic, it struck the lawyer that the chapter was rather a highly farcical comment upon business inexperience and a most impressive one upon what a horny-handed individual like Harsen could do in twelve months without any initial money at all. However, for Janet's evidently emotional judgment of the part her husband had played he had only a vague smile of curiosity.

She was watching him soberly and steadily. The car turned and they headed up a broad, spectacular boulevard.

"I wonder if you know the story?" she asked, and he knew from her manner that he was to have a surprise.

"Probably not."

"Did you know that Butler's failure was of his own choosing?" She paused, her level glance upon him. "Of his own choosing—absolutely."

Winter's smile died. "Who told you that? Powell?"

"Yes, and he told me that he and I ought to be ashamed of ourselves."

He saw that she was going to let him have it piece by piece. So he merely nodded and bided his time.

"Between us we did a horribly unfair thing. With me it was blindness—mere youth. With Julian it was—well, I don't know what it was with Julian."

Her seriousness was almost oppressive and with her unswerving eyes and slow tones it was evident to Winter that Janet was not going to sacrifice an ounce of credit for her husband if she could help it.

"What we did was this, Uncle Charles," she declared, pressing her lips for an instant; "we tricked him into a place no decent man would hold. As he put it to Julian—he was financing his business—the business, you know—upon—upon—"

Winter grasped it all. "Upon another man's affections for his wife"; and he turned away, suddenly realising that never before had he held Butler Pierce in such high regard. He saw a quality of fibre in him that he had not known was there, he placed a new value upon the kind of pride which the young man had, he listed his failure among the few failures, of which in long experience he knew, more worthy than successes. And the most admirable part of it, the

lawyer reflected, was Butler's protective silence, even with him, during the week of his estrangement from Janet. Without explaining, he turned to her and with a phrasing of enthusiasm that surprised himself he told her that her husband was "an ace."

In details Janet was hazy, but she spoke of an episode one night upon the lawn at Tuckerton when she and Julian had been suddenly disclosed by Powell's returning car; and she managed to repeat enough of what she had gathered from that pursuitful young man so that the lawyer was certain that he had the transaction, clearly and fully.

"So Butler told the trust company that if they wouldn't renew the notes without endorsement they needn't renew them at all?" he eventually asked.

"Well, no, not just that," Janet corrected; "without Julian's endorsement."

"They must have thought that strange!"

"They did! But Julian said that Butler wouldn't give them a hint. He promised to explain to Julian at dinner, but Julian broke the engagement. He wanted to get some business, he said, out of you."

"Well, he got it," laughed Winter. "It's rarely that young man doesn't get what he goes after."

By way of reply to this observation Winter noted, with interest, that Janet let her eyes drop and pressed her lips.

"It wasn't till yesterday that Julian found out. He made Butler tell," she said.

Another thoughtful pause and then: "It was de-

cent of Julian to come and tell me. He did it of his own accord. He said we'd all been fools."

"A verdict," commented Winter, "which is generally safe and particularly useful in wiping out old scores. Was that all he had to say?"

"That and—and good-bye."

"And what did you say to him?"

He knew before she spoke that she was going to close the subject down with a bang.

"What I said," she laughed from her corner with warning mirth, "and with many regrets, to that most engaging and contrite gentleman—"

"—who," took up the lawyer in spite of himself, "has learned that the everlasting getting of things blunts the soul—"

"What I said," concluded Janet emphatically, "was . . . good-bye."

"For good?"

"For good!"

"Along with youth . . ."

". . . and some ideals!"

They dropped it there. The machine was now sweeping up through Westchester. On either hand stretched the rich countryside, more wanton and bounteously beautiful in the last lateness of summer than at any other time. It was shortly after one o'clock. The sun lay in a subdued glare upon the greyish-white road ahead of them and splotched houses with the black shadows of trees. Now and again they passed a rushing motor, intensifying the drowsiness in the air.

CHARLES WINTER HAS A CALLER 401

Winter glanced once at Janet and saw that apparently, a little spent, she had let her head drop back. Her hands lay lax in her lap, but her eyes were not closed. She smiled at him gently and he faced forward.

Tuckerton was near and there were still things he wanted to tell Janet—many things—but the hour invited silence. He wanted to tell her that the magnificent strength of her youth had been the tragic weakness thus far of her life; but that no youth without idealism, hot desires, buoyant faith—all of which she had had in double measure—was any youth at all; that those very qualities made up the wonderful, marvellous luxury of youth—the most dearly bought luxury in the world and for which one could never pay in advance. He wanted to tell her, too, that youth never knew its advantages—an exultant response to a baby's smile, a capacity to give one's self forth without reserve; those blessings youth never knew were blessings and their value was never reckoned until with the coming of age they were gone. But he throttled his didacticism; in the full understanding between them it seemed misplaced.

And his mind trailed off to Janet's birth and robust childhood, her first flowering, her girlhood . . . What pain, what infinite pain, was needed to produce such a presence as was there beside him! With how much bitterness and agony the dross had been smeltered out! . . . Thus, in his seared grey heart he was thinking of her, and he wondered, as the breeze through an open window beat upon his tired, sallow face, what she

was thinking of him. . . Most likely she was not thinking of him at all.

"Isn't it funny," and somehow he did not turn about when, abruptly, he heard her speaking. "You're all that really escaped—aren't you?—the only one."

He half guessed her meaning and kept his eyes upon the distant road. "Escaped what?" he asked gruffly.

"Escaped me," she told him, with tenderness, "and my hopes."

Now he turned about, grinning, he was sure, like a sheepish schoolboy.

"Well," he observed drily, "you never expected much of me. That's why I escaped"; and then after a pause, added: "You see how nice it's going to be to live."

"Oh, it's going to be wonderful!"

"Meadowhedge and . . . all?"

She nodded with confidence.

"Little income and . . . little things?"

Again she nodded.

His eyes rested upon her face and their silence drew itself out. For his own delectation he would have liked to have had her go on. For some such reason he continued grinning, with faint inquiry in his expression. It was a delight when she took him up.

"It's this way, Uncle Charles," she declared, with sudden matter-of-factness, and sitting erect, "when out of a wreck like mine a woman has saved her husband and his love, her boy and his health—well, now, isn't that enough?"

He nodded.

"What more, anyway, could a woman ask?"

This was her question, to which he replied with a certain grimness to cover his emotion.

"You're right," he told her. "No woman ought—at least I don't think—"

"Well," pronounced Janet in a kind of benediction as they wheeled through Tuckerton village, "that's all this woman—please don't grin, Uncle Charles—asks."

For Charles Winter the grinding climb up the hill was all too quick. Just before they rounded the bend Janet, making the most of the car window as a mirror, tilted her hat a trifle more saucily. Then the lawyer had the lonely delight of seeing her twist about the seat in front of her. In that small labor he did not believe that she needed help. Immediately afterward, with a hint of her old eagerness, she settled forward upon the edge of their cushion. With the persistent instinct of an observer he seemed to draw off a little more to himself and he hooked his arm comfortably through the loop of a convenient strap.

In a moment, he knew, she would have leaped out. When she had taken the portentous bound, then, as always and forever, he thought, he would be alone; a great and wondrous thing would have somehow gone out of his life. But, then, it came to him with a sudden remembrance, a far greater, a far more wondrous thing had come.

Up above them was the house. Even at their narrowing distance the short brick walk seemed, in the

sunshine, vividly red and the gargoyle knocker gleamed with a keen, new brightness and splendour. It was a day, indeed, for Janet to come home—a day like the clapping of children's hands! . . . Her clear white face, so finely curved at the chin, was set ahead. In it there seemed a kind of near-heaven look; he saw her searching along the windows of the house—the house of her dreams and her despairs and of her youth. He thought of how much there might be in her mind.

They were at the crest of the hill now. The car, with a scrape, was swinging about. Suddenly, without a word or without warning, Janet seemed to turn to him; then he felt her kiss. In the instant there was a tender, silent squeeze upon his hand—so tender that it might not have been. That was all.

The car had stopped. Janet's arm was thrusting beyond him to the latch. He did not move, but followed the line of her vision to the door. It was open. Butler, a solid, tall figure, was framed there and seemed to balance at the threshold. Janet by now was out of the car and at the edge of the brick walk. Winter, a little dimly, saw Butler take a step forward, his arm opening. There was a sudden revealing flash of the firm lines of Janet's shoulders and back, bent in haste. . . The lawyer leaned forward, shouted, most peremptorily to his driver to go on, banged close the car door, and with a peculiar small choke turned his head aside.

No need to look; another battle with youth had been

WON.

THE END

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